Tokyo Ravens Volume3

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あざの耕平
KouheiAzano

異世界ハーレムは
建てません。3

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「神仙酒コンチェルト」でデビュー。徳島県出身。代表作として「Dクラッカーズ」「BLACK BLOOD BROTHERS」シリーズなど。この原稿を執筆中にiPhoneを買いました。以来、仕事でも大活躍中。もしなければ、この巻はこんな風には書けてなかったです。すごいぜiPhone。

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東京レイヴンズ3

cHImAirA DanCE

あざの耕平

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東京レイヴンズ3
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「春虎（はるとら）っ？　今の試験、一体いくつわからなかったのさ！」
「……ぜ、ぜんぶ」

進級試験に挑む、陰陽塾の若き闇鴉（レイヴン）、春虎たち一年生。しかし落ちこぼれの春虎は、筆記試験は壊滅的、実技試験でも呪術をうまく使いこなせず夏目（なつめ）をはらはらさせるハメに。そんな中、都内各地で突如として霊災が発生。かつて霊災で後遺症を負った春虎の親友、冬児（とうじ）の身体にも異変が起き、同時に『オーガ・イーター』と呼ばれる『十二神将』最凶の陰陽師が現れ――!!

「魔」に蝕まれる冬児、土御門（つちみかど）次代当主として事態収拾に走る夏目。春虎は、親友を救うため、主である夏目のために、奔走するが!?

虎と竜

3

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「――これでおあいこだね。バカ虎」

その笑顔が、春虎の中で誰かと重なった

「実にいいぜ、それっぽいの。『やり甲斐』がある」

鬼喰い（オーガ・イーター）の身体から霊力がたゆたい、禍々しい気配を発する。

「いつかさっと
俺が暴走しないとなぜ言ってるうちに
そう言ってるうちに
殺せる？」

冬児の眼差しと、
鬼の眼差しが重なっていく

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Chapter 1 - A New Beginning

Very few people present at the time noticed the beginning of that incident.

Most people, almost all people only noticed after thinking about it after the fact.

Noticing that they had crossed the line that could not be returned to.

Part 1

There were heavy chains outside the hospital room, the door was enchanted with magic, and a sacred rope was twined around itself on the outside, with sakaki[1] inserted to the left and right. His father cautiously removed them one by one, and finally put the key into the lock, turning the door handle.

This cautious attitude made him inadvertently swallow. He only now realized that he had only made this proposal because of his unsatisfied curiosity and boredom - as well as some sympathy.

His father laughed, asking him "maybe you should just drop it", but he immediately shook his head upon hearing that. That sympathy had long since turned into a different emotion the moment he saw this 'sealed' hospital room.

After taking a deep breath - the youth slowly opened the hospital room door.

Part 2

When the sound of the bell announcing the end of the exams sounded, the students sighed one after another, the tense atmosphere in the classroom suddenly collapsing. Murmurs and laughter came after a while, and the teacher responsible for proctoring the exam walked through the classroom, rapidly collecting the exam papers from the students' desks. The proctor collected the exam paper from in front of the straight-backed, properly-sitting Tsuchimikado Natsume , but Tsuchimikado Harutora sprawled on his desk, half-dead.

The Onmyou Academy - The premier Onmyouji development institution in the nation. This place was one of the classrooms of the academy building.

Harutora was collapsed on the desk, and the look on his face was indiscernible at the time. Even if the exam had ended, restlessness and tension still lingered on the face of Natsume in the neighboring seat, but she herself wasn't the reason to make her restless and tense. Rather, it was Harutora, as this childhood friend had collapsed on the desk long before the bell had sounded.

When she was taking the exam, Natsume would often glance anxiously at Harutora, and once the proctor collected the exam papers and left, she couldn't wait to open her mouth to inquire.

"Harutora? The exam just now--"

"Don't say it." Harutora interrupted her words without waiting for her to finish, still sprawled weakly on the desk. "Don't say it and don't ask, don't say anything at all , don't ask anything at all, let me have some peace and quiet..... Please, tasukete[2]......"

"P, Please isn't the same as 'tasukete', don't you mean ' onegai'[3]?"

".....Onegai[4]....."

Harutora begged in a whimper, and Natsume looked up at the ceiling with a pained face. Then, she said in a quiet whisper that only the neighboring seat could hear: " .....Which parts? What didn't you get?"

".....Didn't I say not to ask?"

".....But how many questions did you not get, one? Two!?"

".....A, A lot of questions....."

Harutora's tone was agonized, and Natsume's expression instantly turned from bitterness into grief.

"What do you mean by you didn't get a lot of questions! Almost all of the exam just now was within the sample problems, didn't we review them three times yesterday!"

".....Uuu."

"Didn't we actually prepare very well for the essay topic? Didn't we stay up late many nights preparing?"

"......Uuu."

Harutora twisted his body as he was sprawled on the desk like he didn't have the energy to reply or rise, and Natsume looked at her childhood friend as if she couldn't bear the sight.

Harutora's grades had plummeted after entering the Onmyou Academy. As a descendant of the great Onmyouji Abe no Seimei and a member of the Tsuchimikado family that had been a great Onmyoudou family in the past, he was simply worlds apart from the outstanding main family heir Natsume. The grades of Harutora, who had been born in a branch family, were far lower than those of the other classmates, and he would often have to receive after-school tutoring because of this. Despite the importance of the Tsuchimikado family reputation, Natsume had also given up on the thought of rescuing Harutora's grades.

But, the exam this time was quite important, as their successful advancement into the second year was at stake , so it couldn't be abandoned lightly.

Harutora raised his head with an 'uuu', his chin against the desk and his jaw clenched.

"Whatever, I've already done all I can, all I have left is to rely on..... getting back with practicals....."

Natsume sighed upon hearing her childhood friend's sorrowful lamentation, shaking her head. Though she was anxious, the practicals were truly all that were left to turn things around.

Natsume turned her head, lightly uttering a warning with her original voice: "......I won't forgive you if you dare to get held back." Saying this, she raised her gaze, looking out of the classroom window.

The weather was gray, with dark clouds spread about and a thick, cold air could still be felt. The sun was a bit weak, lacking any vivid, bright colors. It seemed that they would still have to wait a long time for the bright spring sun to arrive.

Next month - early February - they would advance to the second year.

Half a year had already passed since Harutora entered the Onmyou Academy to study.

The spear blade moved like a swallow, slashing through the air.

Of course, the opponent was attacking with the back of the blade, but if he took a hit head-on, he wouldn't just be fine after rolling on the ground a couple times in pain. Harutora used the back end of the shakujou to keenly deal with the attacking blade.

He rapidly moved side to side, regulating his breathing and focusing his spiritual power. The pentagram under his left eye gradually burned because of his circulating spiritual power, and when he felt this heat, he focused his mind on the shikigami before him.

The Onmyou Agency defensive shikigami 'G2 Yaksha' named 'Kokfuu'.

Not only did this shikigami possess basic unarmed combat techniques, it was proficient in using a spear. It was not an opponent comparable to an outsider like Harutora.

But, the shakujou in Harutora's hands was a magical tool specially created by his homeroom teacher Ohtomo, and though he needed to expend a large amount of spiritual power, he could turn his spiritual power into a blade of magical power or a shield to clash with an enemy. Harutora was clumsy with magic, but his spiritual power was strong, and this weapon suited to both attack and defense could be said to match up with him. With this shakujou in his hand, at the least he could stand on the same level as his opponent, even if the chance of victory was not high.

Kokfuu's spear clashed with Harutora's shakujou, and with his spirit-seeing eyes, Harutora 'saw' the surrounding aura swirl, along with Kokfuu's magical

energy, the aura his own body gave off, and the meandering magical energy flowing along the haft of the shakujou.

Magical power collided with magical power, and a spiritual wind whose temperature was ambiguous roared, his body - his spiritual body - burning as if it had been scorched. On the other hand, the shikigami Kokfuu was almost unconcerned by the surrounding spiritual pressure, its exterior giving off the exact same impression as before and continuing to attack Harutora like a robot.

But - a chance! The thought flashed through Harutora's mind, and a small figure instantly ran up behind Kokfuu's back as if seeing through his thoughts.

It was a small child, and moreover a little girl who didn't even look ten years old. She wore a suikan and a hakama[5], her appearance proper like a Japanese doll, with two round, blue eyes, a pair of pointed, triangular ears on her head, and a leaf-shaped tail growing out of her lower body.

She wasn't a human, but rather a shikigami. She was Harutora's defensive shikigami - Kon.

"Haaaaah!"

Kon attacked Kokfuu from behind at the same time as she released her stealth and materialized. She slashed the beloved blade Kachiwari in her hand, cutting Kokfuu in its lower leg. That move was outside Kokfuu's expectations - outside the expectations of its master, Harutora's classmate Kurahashi Kyouko, who controlled it - and Kon's surprise attack made them flounder for a moment. 'Lag' reactions appeared in Kokfuu who had suffered an attack, and interference coursed through its body as it stopped moving for a moment.

Just then--

"I win!"

Harutora's shakujou struck Kokfuu, and Kyouko who had been controlling the shikigami hissed: "Hmph", looking displeased.

"Haha! How's that! I undoubtedly won this, right?"

"A-A-A, Amazing, Harutora-sama! Your skill is incredible--!"

"Your timing was perfect too, Kon, we're cooperating more and more seamlessly!"

"I-I-I-I am extremely grateful for your praise!"

Harutora laughed joyously and Kon's face reddened in embarrassment from receiving her master's praise. Not only did her face flush, her tail also wagged constantly like a puppy. The defeated Kyouko hmphed in displeasure, dismissing Kokfuu's materialized form.

"......I said before that Kokfuu was originally adjusted to act together with Hakuou. Don't get it wrong, it can't wield its full power in a solo battle."

Kyouko warned Harutora with an imposing manner.

Her brown hair was tied up and hung down, her eyelashes were long, her eyes were sharp, and though she seemed quite competitive, she was extremely cute. Even if she wore a new uniform on her, it couldn't conceal her pretty figure or her pair of beautiful legs.

Kyouko's strength was inferior only to Natsume's among the first-year students. Maybe it was because of this that losing to Harutora made her dissatisfied even in

a mock battle where she couldn't use her full strength. When they had started, Harutora and Kon hadn't even had a twenty percent chance of winning, but his winning rate this year was greater than fifty percent, showing the pair's notable growth.

Kyouko frowned and Harutora couldn't help but smile wryly upon seeing her reaction.

"I know that very well, I'm not getting carried away."

"......It's fine as long as you know."

"D-D, Don't heed her, Harutora-sama. Treat the complaints of the loser as the sound of the wind."

"I can hear everything, Kon-chan."

Kyouko narrowed her eyes, but Kon kept a straight face, her ears standing up, pretending she hadn't heard it . This shikigami was loyal to her master Harutora, but she was quite high and mighty towards people other than Harutora.

Harutora and the others before him were currently in the magic practice field underneath the academy building. The magic practice field was set up like an athletic stadium and had a barrier encircling the arena on all sides.

Since he had entered the academy - more accurately, since he had fought with a Yakou fanatic as soon as he had entered the academy - Harutora had been regularly having mock battles with Kyouko's shikigami. The reason was obviously so he could deal with Yakou fanatics, and in particular, it was to accumulate a form of actual battle experience and get used to methods of using magical energy as well as magical battles.

Natsume had been troubled by a 'rumor' every since she was small, and it had been rumored that she was the reincarnation of Tsuchimikado Yakou, the ancestor of modern Onmyoudou and the culprit of a spiritual disaster in Tokyo that had led to unprecedented calamity . Because of this, Natsume was often harassed by blindly faithful Yakou fanatics. Also, Harutora was only training his fighting ability as much as possible because he had

obeyed the branch family traditions and had become the main family's shikigami in order to protect his master Natsume.

"How is it, Natsume? I should be able to get some decent grades in the practical exam, right?" Harutora looked up at the spectator seats from the arena, chatting with Natsume who had been watching the competition from the side.

Natsume deliberately hmphed upon hearing him say that.

"Bakatora, do you really think the exam will ask the practitioner to fight directly with a shikigami?"

"That's true..... But I'm already adept at using magical energy."

"You still rely on that shakujou to convert your spiritual power to magical energy, and you can't bring magical tools into the exam!" Natsume's face went taut as she strictly criticized the triumphant Harutora.

That serious action complemented her fine-lined, beautiful appearance. Her glossy black hair grew to her waist, tied behind her back with a pink ribbon. Her body

was small, and her exterior seemed incomparably delicate at first glance, but she gave off a perseverant will from inside.

"You still aren't proficient at using simple shikigami yet, and though I don't believe this mock battle is a waste of time, in all honestly, it really isn't the time to do these things right now."

"What, weren't you fine before about having a mock battle today?"

"That was because we don't know what kind of topic this year's practical will have, so the only preparation you can take now is to smoothly circulate your spiritual power as a warm-up for tomorrow's practical exam." She couldn't stand it - Natsume shrugged her shoulders like a home tutor teaching a stupid student.

The Onmyou Academy first-year curriculum was based around lectures, and practical training was rare, so it was the practitioner's own qualifications rather than techniques that were important for the advancement exam. The content of the exam would also change every year.

"But you completely rely on the shakujou's help, and you won't get any effective warm-up at all, so why don't you face the shikigami bare-handed this time?"

"......That's suicide."

"Oh my, I'm happy to cooperate since Natsume-kun says so."

"Tch! Kyouko, don't call for Kokfuu so happily!"

Natsume helplessly shook her head, looking down at Harutora's panicked appearance.

Her attitude was still quite severe even if her shikigami had won. Shikigami had to be by their Master's side all the time in order to protect their master's safety, or in other words, Harutora would no longer be of any use as a shikigami as soon as he was unable to smoothly pass the exam and had to be held back or leave the academy.

But--

"......Pff." Momoe Tenma who sat next to Natsume couldn't help but laugh. His body type was about the

same as Natsume's, a glasses-wearing, innocent-looking boy who was a classmate of Natsume and Harutora.

"W, What is it, Tenma-kun, what's so funny?" Natsume turned around in surprise upon hearing Tenma secretly laugh from the side.

"Because--" A gentle smile emerged on Tenma's face. " Natsume-kun, you say that, but when Harutora-kun won just now, you jumped up with your fists clenched in excitement and called out 'He won!' with a red face."

"What? What are you talking about! I, I didn't do that... ... P, Please don't speak nonsense!"

Natsume was flustered for a moment, refuting him in a stammer. As her words became more and more confused, an abnormally shrill and clear voice was even audible.

"Hey, Natsume!"

Harutora hurriedly called out a warning from the arena, and only then did Natsume come to her senses, coughing lightly a couple times with a red face. Tenma and Kyouko looked at the interaction between the two with expressions of incomprehension.

Unlike the pure white uniform that Kyouko wore, Natsume wore a slightly bluish, black uniform - the color of a raven's plumage - the male uniform, the same as Harutora and Tenma.

But - really, that person was usually calm, but she would become flustered as soon as she encountered something sudden. Her true identity would be revealed sooner or later..... Harutora muttered snappily in his heart.

The heir to the Tsuchimikado family had to show himself as a male, and Tsuchimikado Natsume had entered the Onmyou Academy as a male student in compliance with this Tsuchimikado family tradition. Harutora wondered how long Natsume would be able to conceal this for..... Honestly, Natsume was a girl to the letter but dressed as a male. For now, the only ones who knew this were Harutora, Harutora's shikigami Kon, and Harutora's and Natsume's good friend, Ato Touji.

...These students are really slow..... Even after half a year, her appearance looked very strange to me.

During this half-year at the Onmyou Academy, he had noticed that the biggest reason Natsume was able hide it from others was that she socialized very little.

Other than with Harutora and Touji who knew her identity, she was only close to Kyouko and Tenma who were here. That was a result of Natsume's original shy personality, but more so because other people kept her at arm's length because of the rumor concerning Yakou.

If one actually interacted with Natsume, one would notice that she was actually quite imperfect. She was a typical gifted student in the eyes of others because no one had noticed her deliberately-hidden other side. Though her hair wasn't like a boy's, most people explained it to themselves as 'customs of a traditional family'. Fortunately, since it was magic community, there were thoughts that 'his hair ornament has spiritual power', whether it was true or not. Even so, a pink ribbon was too obvious, and Harutora couldn't help but secretly complain.....

"Preconceptions really have strong effects..... Huh? That's weird, where did Touji go?"

Harutora who was looking up from the arena glanced everywhere, but he couldn't find Touji who had originally been watching the battle together with Natsume and Tenma.

"The principal called Touji-kun to the principal's office. " Tenma replied on behalf of Natsume because her mood still hadn't calmed down.

"The principal?"

"Right - You know about the principal's cat shikigami too, right? That cat ran over and said that she needed Touji-san for something."

Harutora turned towards Kyouko upon hearing Tenma's reply.

"Kyouko, do you have any idea why the principal would look for a student?"

"Grandma didn't mention anything, so I'm not sure. But since it was grandma who called Touji over, maybe she had a strange 'vision'."

"Vision?"

"Right, actually it's just divination..... Didn't you know ? My grandma is a first-class astrologist."

"Astrologist?"

".....It seems like you should just repeat the first year."

The bad student of the class asked a question for every sentence Kyoko said, making her arch her eyebrows in impatience.

The principal of the Onmyou Academy was named Kurahashi Miyo, an old woman with an elegant temperament and the head of the famous Kurahashi family that simultaneously had a huge influence on the modern magic community. She was quite a famous astrologist - a diviner, and even though she had long since retired, it was said that there still wasn't anyone in the nation on par with her. Kyouko was the granddaughter of this principal.

"Hmph..... Whatever, the principal won't be messing around anyway. It would be worrisome if Ohtomo-sensei were looking for him."

"Touji's grades aren't bad. In contrast, a student close to failing like you should be more worrisome."

Kyouko pointed that out frankly and calmly, and Harutora 'tch'ed, his face sinking.

"Touji and I both transferred in from an ordinary high school..... When did such a big gap open up?"

"You were never at his level since the beginning."

"That's true! I know, damn it! That guy just has a good brain, he knew a lot about magic before transferring!"

"When I said 'since the beginning', I didn't mean since you transferred in. Rather, it's been that way since birth."

"Since birth!? And isn't it miserable that it's hard to even deny!?"

Harutora cursed angrily, his eyes teary. "H-H, Harutora-sama, becoming concerned equates to admitting your birth was inferior!" Kon consoled him tactlessly. Tenma in the spectator seats couldn't help

bursting out laughing as he listened, but Natsume's face was solemn. But she quickly cheered up, straightened her spine, and spoke another proposal.

"Harutora! The exam is tomorrow, so you should practice magical energy conversion methods. Your spiritual power is strong, and if you can smoothly convert it to magical energy, you should be able to deal with the exam easily!"

The practical advancement[6] exam was tomorrow.

Harutora's fate would also be decided tomorrow.

Part 3

"Purifying a spiritual disaster?"

"Right, that's the topic of this year's first-year practical exam."

Principal Kurahashi sat on a chair, nodding towards Touji who stood in front of her office desk.

The interior of the Onmyou Academy principal's office was filled with traditional decorations, completely out of tune with the academy building that was like a modern office building. Bookshelves filled two walls, with a red carpet laid out on the floor and a painted glass room divider. It looked about as big as a modern cafe, and it was overall quite traditional, with almost all of the room's furnishings being the principal's possessions or creations of the Onmyou Academy.

Only the principal and Touji were inside the principal's office, and the mechanical clock placed above the bookshelf ticked to and fro, quietly marking the passage of time.

"Of course, we won't have first-year students purify a true spiritual disaster. Honestly, we've recently noticed an unstable aura that could create spiritual disasters, and because of this, the teacher who will be supervising the practical exam proposed to use this rare chance to deliberately allow the aura to become imbalanced, creating a forced phase one spiritual disaster, and then leaving it up to the students to purify it."

After saying this, the principal supplemented it with some more detailed explanations.

The principal was dressed in a kimono like olden times, her body small like a child's, but not looking small at all in the eyes of others due to her upright posture. Her shoulder-length short hair was already grayed, but she didn't feel old in any other way, her outward appearance still kept quite young. Incidentally, there was a three-colored calico cat curled up and sleeping soundly, nestled on the redwood office desk. It was her shikigami.

Touji who stood before the principal had a slender body, wearing the Onmyou Academy uniform on his body and with a bandanna around his head, his hair messy. Even if this handsome boy didn't open his mouth, he gave others a courageous feeling, and even if he was being called into the principal's office right now, he didn't show a speck of tension.

"Could I ask you what your motive is? I heard that conventionally, the topic of the practical exam isn't announced until the day of." A cold smile emerged on his lips after hearing the principal's explanation and he asked provocatively. But the principal didn't criticize

Touji's attitude, lightly raising the corners of her mouth instead.

"The exam emphasizes fairness..... But this exam is unfavorable to you, after all..." The principal smiled, staring directly into Touji's eyes. "You experienced a true spiritual disaster first-hand, and you're still battling against the after-effects that linger in your body."

"....."

The principal's gaze was tranquil and clear, not a speck of sympathy to be found, and probed for his inadvertent reactions. Touji didn't avoid it, looking directly back into the principal's eyes. Then, he deliberately relaxed his guarded demeanor.

"...That's right, but, could I ask how this is unfavorable for me? Could it be that you believe the spiritual disaster from that time left behind shadows in my heart?"

"Even if you are self-aware, you can't be certain it's not a possibility."

"Since I don't have that kind of self-awareness, I'm not sure whether it's there or not." Touji suppressed his own emotions, speaking leisurely.

Two years had already passed now since Touji got drawn into a spiritual disaster.

At the time, he was still a third year in middle school preparing to advance to high school, but had to stay in the hospital for half a year to get treated for the after-effects left by the spiritual disaster. Then, one year after he had gotten involved in the spiritual disaster, he had entered the same high school to study with Harutora , so in other words, he originally should have entered high school a year earlier than Harutora and the others. But, the reason he was well-acquainted with Onmyoudou was because he had ample time during his treatment to use for self-learning.

".....Did you call for me because you wanted to persuade me to give up on participating in the practical examination of my own will?"

"Huh? Were you planning to?"

The principal asked without any malicious intentions, and Touji deliberately shrugged his shoulders as a reply.

"I never liked exams in the first place, as letting others test my own abilities isn't something suited to my personality."

"Oh my, that way of thinking is a bit extreme, Touji-san. Regardless of whether your grades are qualified, it's not a bad thing to understand your own ability from an objective standpoint."

"But disregarding whether grades are qualified or not is impossible for this advancement exam, right?"

"That's true."

The principal couldn't help but laugh at a student retorting like that. She laughed vigorously, and the sleeping calico cat nestled on the table lightly waved its tail.

"But, since Natsume-san and Harutora-san will both participate in tomorrow's exam, you should be unable to give up, right? I wanted you to come here hoping to notify you of the exam contents beforehand and let you prepare yourself."

"Prepare myself? Does that need the principal to notify me herself?"

"Well..... Unfortunately Ohtomo-sensei is out right now, and I am the only other person in the academy who knows of your 'secret'. I was probably worrying a bit too much."

Upon hearing this remark from the principal, a mix between self-derision and a wry smile flashed across Touji's expression, a complex and troubled attitude that he showed extremely rarely. But, that expression vanished without a trace soon after.

".....So you were worrying about me, how flattering."

Saying this, Touji returned to his calm tone and expression, irony hanging in his words, very much like his style. But the principal smiled again upon seeing Touji with this kind of attitude, raising her eyes to look askance at this student.

"...Touji-san? That attitude of yours isn't so good."

"Huh? Oh, sorry, was my tone too arrogant?"

"Just the opposite. You're fretful inside, yet you express yourself calmly and composedly, but that attitude is only 'pretend maturity', not a true 'mature' response. Moreover, you are using your identity as a spiritual disaster victim as a means of attack, while speaking almost unconcernedly. That kind of attitude isn't good either. Annoying the other party can only count as a kind of childish communication technique, and it would sound much cooler if you just directly said that you didn't need sympathy."

Touji hadn't expected the principal to criticize him for that and went silent without opening his mouth for a long time. The principal had spoken straightforwardly, and even someone who wasn't Touji wouldn't know how to respond.

".....Your words..... are really resolute."

"Oh my, did I say something wrong? Or did you mean 'D-Don't speak nonsense, th-th-that's not true'?"

"Was there a reason to stutter when you said that..... I understand your meaning. Sorry, I should have been more sincere, thank you for your guidance."

Touji showed a rare helplessness, scratching his head over his bandanna. Even Touji didn't want to discuss the definition of 'maturity' with a grandmotherly principal.

Especially since the principal's advice actually made him extremely unhappy.

He had never meant to keep a secret. Rather, he had planned on facing and accepting the after-effects the spiritual disaster left behind in his body, and had only chosen to transfer to the Onmyou Academy with Harutora for the strength to overcome them. However, he couldn't help but feel anxious inside because that hard work had only resulted in others worrying unnecessarily about him.

Very few people know about that incident, even people close to Touji. Excluding the principal before him, Ohtomo-sensei and Harutora were the only ones remaining who knew about this incident, and even Natsume wasn't very sure about 'what kinds of after-effects were truly left behind'.

".....You also understand that these after-effects are very troublesome. Right now, I've already adapted to them, but circumstances like right now show up often,

making me realize that I'm a spiritual disaster victim, and I can't help but feel fretful. However, I believe I can recognize them pretty well."

Touji spoke, his tone still harsh like always, but his expression this time seemed a bit like he was joking. After hearing him say that, the principal didn't plan on continuing to trouble him.

"......Perhaps, as I actually just said that this exam would be unfavorable to you by my individual subjective judgment. If you're unconvinced, let me apologize to you here. However..."

"I know, the principal's judgment is equivalent to the Onmyou Academy's judgment. Since I'm an Onmyou Academy student, I naturally defer to the decisions of the teachers, so thank you for taking the time to warn me." Touji spoke sincerely, but he quickly grinned again.

"......Also, never mind whether there are shadows left in my heart right now, I'll still find time to discuss the dangers of lacking self-awareness with my primary physician. From the perspective of the Onmyou Academy, it would sound bad if my condition suddenly changed for the worse during the exam, right?" Right

after adding those extra words, he cast a rebellious gaze towards the principal.

"You don't need to worry about that. I'm sorry I didn't tell you from the beginning, but I've already consulted your primary physician."

"What? You mean Harutora's father?" Hearing the principal's reply, Touji felt greatly surprise, inadvertently widening his eyes.

When Touji had gotten involved in a spiritual disaster, it was Harutora's father who had been the doctor responsible for his treatment. Harutora's father was an Onmyou doctor - an Onmyouji specialized in treating ailments. After arriving in Tokyo, Touji had visited the clinic once every month. The reason he knew Harutora was because Harutora's father had looked after him so much.

"You didn't know? Harutora-san's father was also a graduate of this place."

"I, I see, so then....."

The Onmyou Academy had been created half a century ago, and not only was it old, it was actually the

only school in the nation specialized in fostering Onmyouji. There should have been quite a few Onmyouji from Onmyou Academy during the same time period as Harutora's father.

"I can't remember which year he was from, but he performed outstandingly. Amami-kun was extremely regretful when he left the Onmyou Agency."

"......Amami-kun?"

"Oh my, sorry for being unclear. He is the current head of the Onmyou Agency's magic crime investigation department, he and I are old friends." The principal spoke relaxedly.

The head of the Magic Crime Investigation Department could be called the head of the Mystical Investigators. As expected of the Kurahashi family head to refer '-kun' to someone like him.

However, it was still Harutora's father that surprised Touji the most.

"The Mystical Investigator head felt regretful..... Could it be that Harutora's father was a Mystical Investigator before?"

"You don't know that either? He's only an Onmyou doctor in a rural place right now, and maybe that's why people find it very difficult to imagine him having such a past. But looking at it from the perspective of 'specialists in casting magic on humans', the techniques of Mystical Investigators and Onmyou doctors actually overlap quite a bit. After all, how could someone unfamiliar with magic cope?"

"......That's true." Touji echoed in a low voice.

Harutora's father was a respected Onmyou doctor, and Touji had only kept his life two years ago because of him. One could say he was Touji's savior, and he was also a well-trusted doctor.

"......In other words, Harutora's father judged that this level of an exam wouldn't influence the after-effects?"

"Yes, that's right, so I said just now that I only called for you this time to let you prepare yourself."

"I understand..... But you don't need to worry, it's just a phase one spiritual disaster in the eyes of an outsider like me, so it's nothing scary."

Touji spoke relaxedly, like he had already recovered his pace that had been disturbed earlier.

The spiritual disaster Touji had been involved in two years ago had been on quite a gigantic scale even for the present time when spiritual disasters were commonplace, and had even become a hot topic among society. Though it was an intentional underestimation, his thoughts were truly 'it's just a phase one spiritual disaster'.

"......Could it be that you have some premonition?"

"Oh my? What does that mean?"

"My words have only one meaning. Pardon my rudeness, but the Kurahashi family astrologist is the last resort that previous generations of Onmyou Agency heads relied on, and it's really an incomparable honor for such a great seer to predict my own future."

Sarcasm dripped from Touji's words again, and the principal couldn't help but become stunned.

"......Oh my, oh my..... You seem rich in knowledge, as can be seen from your grades, but it seems it has a bit too much gossip."

"I rather like knowledge of that sort."

Touji spoke firmly, and the principal couldn't help but smile wryly upon hearing it. If Ohtomo, who had evaluated the principal as 'a behind-the-scenes big shot of this industry', heard this, he might break out in a cold sweat.

"Alright..... Then I'll put it to you straight. Touji-san, your 'stars' are extremely difficult to unravel because of the influence of the after-effects. One of the reasons why I am especially concerned about you and called you here like this is because I am unable to read your 'stars'."

The principal spoke calmly towards Touji, her words not showing a trace of sympathy just like before, just giving him the facts she knew.

"....."

Touji's listened to the principal's words with a solemn look, but quickly showed a helpless and presumptuous smile. "...Well said" He sighed again after saying this.

The principal's words were harsh, but in any case they were better than blind comfort. Touji knew better than anyone that his future wouldn't be the best possible.

"I'm grateful for your advice."

"Don't be so polite, but Touji-san, be sure not to feel pessimistic about your future because of this. I'm very happy to see you enter the Onmyou Academy to combat your after-effects, and though the teachers here cannot help you recover from your after-effects, we can teach you the means to save yourself by relying on your own strength and let you live according to your own desires in the future."

"Thank you very much for your goodwill, but unfortunately my current self doesn't have any grand goals like a 'desired way to live'."

"The 'current you' doesn't but that doesn't mean that you will be the same in the future. Limiting your future possibilities isn't a smart way to do things."

The principal encouraged Touji strictly and gently, but a cold smile only emerged on his face. He had no intention of continuing to reply.

Just then, the napping calico cat just made a small yawn, waking up.

The cat stretched its body, looking at the two people in order like it was asking whether they had finished speaking, and the conversation between the two took the opportunity presented by the cat's wordless question to come to an end.

Touji said goodbye to the principal, leaving the principal's office. After he walked into the corridor, he sighed.

He unconsciously raised his arm, grabbing the headband wrapped around his forehead and murmuring : ".....Future possibilities?"

Then, self-derision once again returned to his lips, his eyes full of ridicule - and emptiness. The hand touching his headband was a bit stiff.

".....It's really not my style."

Just after he spoke, the phone in his pocket vibrated right on time. Touji came back to his senses, taking his phone out to check.

'I heard the principal was looking for you. What did you do this time!'

Harutora had sent a text message. It seemed like he had already finished the special practice he was holding with Kyouko's shikigami.

The future was buried in darkness and couldn't be seen into, but at the least there was the usual light shining by Touji's feet in the present.

Touji smiled lightly, striding forward and beginning to type out his response text to Harutora.

A limousine stopped near Shibuya Station on Meiji street.

After the back car door opened, a man got off of the limousine. The man had a loose head of hair tied behind him with a hairband, and a beard covered his mouth and chin. His appearance was completely incompatible with a high-class limousine, but careful observance would

show that his body was fit, his appearance was stern, and his look gave off a firm will and a strong, intellectual temperament.

The man wore a dark green military uniform on the outside and a pair of jeans and lace-up boots, and an old leather backpack on his shoulder. He seemed like a scholar who traveled place to place.

He looked back at the open backdoor of the limousine, briefly uttering: "Thanks for your care."

"Don't concern yourself, I also did this to apologize for the incident half a year ago." A reply came from the other person in the backseat.

There was an old man wearing a black kimono in the backseat. He looked like a doddering old man on the outside, but his voice was curiously youthful. He wore a pair of red sunglasses, his white hair combed back on his head.

The old man didn't look at the man outside the car, but stared straight ahead instead.

"But it's really unfortunate, you plan on courting death this time, right? There will still be a lot of action to come."

"....."

"Whatever. I can find some fun out of it since you're taking the plunge like this."

"Yes, but please....."

"I know, don't worry. At the least, I'll properly keep my distance until you decide a winner."

".....Sorry about that."

The man's choice of words was polite, but his tone was extremely rude. The old man seemed not to care whatsoever as he listened, but seemed happy instead.

"Then I will take my leave. Thank you very much for your care - Master Doman."

The man thanked again, leaving with his head high without a glance back. He didn't turn around even as the car door shut behind his back and the limousine rose up.

He walked towards Aoyama[7], mixing into the noisy group of people around him.

In Shibuya, he didn't need to fear anyone paying attention to his appearance, which was much more convenient for business. He could now begin to act as long as he cooperated with instructions.

".....Please watch over our actions, Chief Dairenji."

He suddenly stopped right after he finished speaking, a sliver of shock flashing over his mask-like face. At the same time, he strengthened the invisibility spell that had already become habit for him, rapidly hiding in a nearby alley.

From his hiding spot, he showed a sharp gaze towards the other end of the street where a group of adolescent boys and girls were chatting and walking on the street. That group had four boys and one girl, all wearing a strange, similarly designed outfit that looked like a uniform. The man was very clear on which school's uniform this was.

It was the uniform of the school that cultivated Onmyouji - the Onmyou Academy. Among them, there was a youth whose unique, characteristic uniform drew more attention.

That youth's black hair was tied up with a pink ribbon, with a small body and a serious face.

The man recognized this youth and knew about him in great detail. Even right now, when he was carrying out a plan where he was betting his life, he still thought of that youth in his heart.

".....North Star King.....!"

As soon as he spoke that name, fanatical desire spilled forth from the man's chest and he wanted to speak with the youth. If only he could say a few words, he would be willing to stay unknown. It would even be fine if he pretended to bump into him and ask for directions. He just wanted to talk with the youth.

Since his plan had started - No, since the incident two years ago, the man had appeared open-minded to everything, but even so, the strong thought that was produced in this moment still burned hot like a raging flame inside his chest, bending his iron will.

After a brief but intense struggle, the man restrained the desire inside him, using all of his strength to prevent himself from rushing forward.

It was very possible that the youth was being watched by the Onmyou Agency, and moreover, if he spoke with the youth right now and checked whether the youth was 'truly him', his resolution to offer his life might waver.

If the youth truly was the North Star King, he would some day bring light into the darkness. He couldn't put that in danger for his own desire, even if he wouldn't see that day.

"......King, please....."

He called out lightly - Then, he could say no more, only able to blankly watch the youth leave.

The moment that group of youths had walked by, the man had noted one other youth.

There had been a bandanna tied around the youth's forehead. He remembered that he had seen this youth before, no, he had an impression that he might have seen this youth before. But he couldn't recall what it was no matter how hard he tried, and the youth just now stole away his attention, leaving him only able to wonder. Where had he seen this youth? The man thought for a while, but wasn't able to think of it in the end. He looked

at the backs of that departing group of youths from afar until their figures had disappeared from before his eyes.

"Ah, Ohtomo! Over here, over here!"

Once he walked into the shop, an enthusiastic " Welcome!" greeted him, followed by an overbearing voice that Ohtomo had missed calling out to him. Ohtomo frowned, unable to help turning in the direction the voice had come from.

This place was a high-class hostess bar in Ginza where wealthy people came to have fun. Costume-wearing females slipped around the room like tropical fish, and among them, Ohtomo's former boss sat in the innermost booth, waving the fan in his hand.

Ohtomo sighed lightly, shaking his head at the male worker who planned on leading the way. He propped up the short walking stick in his right hand, walking into the store while dragging his fake right leg.

An old man and three beautiful women sat inside the booth, with a silver ice bucket filled with ice cubes and a bottle of Pink Champagne on the table. Ohtomo's face sank and he couldn't help raising his eyebrows upon seeing it.

With the guidance of one of the beautiful women, he sat down on the other side of the table.

"......Hey, this is really a waste of money. An old geezer like you won't be living for much longer, so can you stop using the citizens' hard-earned money however you please?"

"Idiot, even if you put it so nastily, I spent my own money."

"Isn't your salary from our taxes?"

"So, at least I'm giving my salary to these pretty girls. You should praise me for being a model government worker."

Isn't that right - he waved his fan, asking happily. The three beautiful women immediately grinned after hearing this, approving of his words one after another. Ohtomo stared maliciously at his never-changing former boss.

Ohtomo was a lecturer in the Onmyou Academy, as well as the homeroom teacher of Harutora's class. His body gave off an abnormally haggard presence, and he wore glasses on his face, a rumpled shirt, a tie, and pants under his equally rumpled outerwear. His right foot was a wooden stick fake leg that looked like a toy, as if he were a medieval pirate, a suspicious element that looked like he had come to the wrong place.

On the other hand, the old man was bone-thin, but full of vigor.

The old man's age was similar to principal Kurahashi's , yet his voice and movements were healthy and strong. He wore an Armani three-piece suit without a tie, showing his individual style. He had mixed in quite well

with the club's atmosphere - more accurately, regardless of what kind of place he was in, he would find some place to treat as 'his area', like a superb actor.

Ohtomo had once been a member of the Onmyou Agency magical crime investigation department, and the old man before him was his boss from that time - the chief of the magic crime investigators, Amami Daizen.

"Come to think of it, this leg of mine isn't convenient for walking, so please don't tell me to come to this kind of place. Especially since not only is it inconvenient to walk, I'm also an irrelevant outsider."

"The person who was so eager to put on that fake leg really dares to say that much? You should apologize to everyone that is truly crippled. And besides, with our friendship, it would be too polite to call yourself irrelevant."

"Don't speak nonsense, there was no longer any connection between Chief Amami and I from the moment I sent that resignation letter."

"Don't be stupid, do you think that thin piece of paper can sever the kindness I always took care of you with?"

"To think you had the nerve to mention 'care' and ' kindness'. As expected of the Chief, your jokes are both novel and bold."

"Pff, how can my novel, bold jokes match up to that fake leg of yours."

Amami grinned at his previous subordinate like an old man playing with a cat. The hostess sitting next to Ohtomo took advantage of the gap in their war of words to help him pour champagne into his wineglass.

"......How is it? Is Miyo-chan the same as always?" Amami opened his mouth to speak, watching the beautiful woman's actions.

"You mean the principal? She's always making me run around to help."

"Haha, she looks nice, but she's a merciless slave driver ."

"Why are things like this... Maybe I don't have luck with old people."

"It's better than not having luck with women."

"......Ahh, why don't this old lady and this old geezer hurry up and die....."

Ohtomo muttered, taking the wineglass from the hostess. Just then, Amami said "well then--", quietly casting a glance to the side. The three hostesses in the booth silently rose and left.

After there were only two people left inside the booth, Amami raised his wineglass, and Ohtomo accordingly raised his wineglass in regard. Then, the two of them drank on their own without saying cheers.

"......How is it on your side? I've heard very bad assessments of the magic crime investigation department recently."

"Hey, how can someone with a job like a Mystical Investigator mind outside opinions."

"I mean that the performance of the Mystical Investigators has been lacking recently. It was I who helped you with the aftermath half a year ago, Chief."

Ohtomo spoke with a grin and no bad intentions. Half a year ago, Natsume had been attacked by a Yakou fanatic; Natsume's attacker at the time had been a Mystical Investigator.

"You mean that incident." Amami's face went bitter, and he lamented heavily.

"Miyo-chan also lectured me fiercely about that incident. She's too cunning, she certainly knew that kind of thing would happen from the beginning."

"Come to think of it, I was the person who actually dealt with that incident, not the principal. What's up with that, how did you guys let a Yakou fanatic get close to the 'candidate'?"

Ohtomo spoke jokingly, but the moment that last word left his mouth, a severe light flashed across the eyes hiding behind his glasses. Amami couldn't help but feel surprised upon seeing that appearance, and he fanned himself with the fan in his hand.

"I can't do anything about that, our manpower is insufficient. Mystical Investigators are too busy to even talk. We're so busy that we even want to get help from cats, though I don't mean Miyo-chan's shikigami."

"Those Mystical Investigators were all stolen away by the Exorcism Bureau. In short, it's all because you're too slow and refused to take the initiative, Chief."

"Every section has problems of insufficient manpower, and in particular, those 'strong people' are in demand..... I finally managed to cultivate someone who could hold his own, but he just resigned a moment later."

Amami hmphed, crooking his mouth and glaring at Ohtomo. A wry smile flitted across Ohtomo's face like he had realized he had spoken incorrectly, but soon after he indifferently brought the wineglass to his lips.

"In any case, the Exorcism Bureau has become exhausted by spiritual disaster purification recently, and when you add the fact that the Exorcism Bureau can't train people overnight, that Kogure who entered at the same time as you did is simply swamped."

"Oh, that person's a nice guy. Very easy to handle, and loves to work."

"You don't say..... Let me tell you, the Exorcism Bureau guys - especially those frontline Exorcists, they're incredibly grateful towards Kogure, especially because--" Amami's tone changed, his face losing its original heartiness. "--Once that person arrives, there's a lower chance of having to use Kagami." He spoke with a serious tone.

Once Amami spoke those words, Ohtomo instantly narrowed his eyes under his glasses. His unique, unfathomable air that made others drop their guard momentarily tensed.

"......Ho." After a while, he called out lightly, a slight smile emerging on his mouth like the shadow of a giant fish floating on the surface of a sea. That smile was somewhat 'suspicious', but it was better described as ' indifferent'.

"......The Exorcism Bureau is being led by Chief Kurahashi, right? Is the principal's son letting that 'brat' misbehave?"

His voice and tone were like usual, but the words he said weren't the usual, and the eyes under his glasses carried a provocative light.

Amami couldn't help but click his tongue upon hearing his former subordinate's question.

"......They collared and chained him, but it would be meaningless if they just removed his fangs. I said many times, the Onmyou Agency's current manpower is insufficient - we lack talent."

Amami closed his fan with a snap. Ohtomo bided his time for the moment, but soon called out quietly, a wry smile emerging on his face again.

"......This is really not something an outsider like me can chip in to."

"Hmph..... We're getting away from the topic. My meaning is that the Magical Investigators lack talent compared to the Exorcism Bureau, but if someone is useful, we'll take them first and ask questions later, regardless of what role it's for. We really have no way of investigating these peoples' backgrounds completely beforehand, and more importantly, it's impossible to tell whether or not someone's a Yakou fanatic beforehand."

"Yes, yes, since in any case there's no shortage of reasons to shirk responsibility - right?"

"Tch, you're as acrid as always..... If you really want to talk about it, Onmyouji all 'recognize' Yakou somehow on the inside, as you could say that modern magic only has a place because of him."

Saying this, Amami pointed the fan at Ohtomo. " Onmyouji and Yakou fanatics - the two are actually not far apart."

".....Maybe."

Ohtomo replied, lightly leaning his mouth towards his wineglass.

Neither of them said a word, and the inside of the booth momentarily fell silent. The ice in the ice bucket

melted, the champagne bottle making slight noises of contact.

Suddenly, a jolt went through Ohtomo's body. His mouth left his wineglass as he turned his head to look behind his shoulder and outside the booth - at the entrance to the shop.

A new customer had walked into the shop, and a worker was currently greeting him. It was a young man - he looked even younger than Ohtomo.

Amami laughed leisurely upon seeing Ohtomo's reaction, saying: "......You still have pretty good eyes."

Then, he called out to the young man: "Hirata!". Once the young man noticed Amami and Ohtomo, he quickly nodded lightly and walked over.

Ohtomo remembered the name he had heard from Amami's mouth.

"Hirata? He couldn't be the one from two years ago--"

Ohtomo quickly spoke up to confirm, getting Amami's affirmative reply.

"We said just now that we couldn't find out beforehand which Onmyouji were Yakou fanatics, and moreover it's not like all people who worship Yakou are dangerous people. We need to be cautious about those people who are 'intense' and 'fanatic' about Yakou and the secret societies where these people gather. Though it's meaningless to explain these things to you since you've already left."

Amami spoke deliberately, and the young man reached their booth just in time.

Since it was their first meeting, Ohtomo was about to rise to greet him, when-- "You don't need to be so polite, Ohtomo-senpai. I know your leg is inconvenient." The young man spoke considerately, so Ohtomo sat back down.

Amami properly introduced the young man from the side.

"This is the shining star of the Mystical Investigators, Hirata Atsune, responsible for conducting the search for the Twin-Horned Syndicate secret society, and therefore taking over your position."

The young man - Hirata - smiled slightly, nodding in regard towards Ohtomo who sat on the sofa.

"I am Hirata of the Onmyou Agency Magic Crime Investigation Department's Public Safety Unit. It's a great honor to meet you personally, I've heard your name a lot. "

Hirata's voice was clear and concise, like water flowing down a tall mountain. Ohtomo felt a bit embarrassed, replying with a "Yeah, nice to meet you....." and a nod.

Due to his neither haughty nor humble attitude, his calm look and sharp, valiant eyes didn't look aggressive, and on the contrary he gave off an honest, upright impression. He seemed more like a pastor or priest rather than an Onmyouji. His hair was shoulder-length, his styled bangs just covering his forehead, and he wore a dark blue suit. Unlike the Armani suit that Amami wore, his clothing wasn't eye-catching, completely suited to the style of a Mystical Investigator.

But, a lock of the flowing black hair on his head was dyed red.

Red - No, more accurately, it was crimson.

"Even in the Mystical Investigators, there aren't many who know of the present and past Divine Generals meeting to talk secretly in this kind of place, especially since it's the 'Heavenly Fan' Amami Daizen and his former right-hand man, the 'Shadow'. I'm sure there would be quite a few people willing to pay money just to see this scene with their own eyes." Hirata looked at Amami and Ohtomo in succession, opening his mouth to speak.

After hearing Hirata's words, Ohtomo inadvertently cast a questioning gaze towards Amami.

The truth was just as Hirata had said. Ohtomo had obtained First-Class Onmyouji qualifications, but when he was performing his Mystical Investigator duties, he was just 'a National First-Class Onmyouji' - in other words, what was commonly known as one of the Twelve Divine Generals. His name was never made public. The name "'Shadow' of the Mystical Investigators" had once spread, bringing fear to criminal magic-users, but the number of people who knew his true identity even inside the Mystical Investigators was extremely limited.

"Can't help it." Amami shrugged his shoulders, noticing Ohtomo's gaze. "He figured it out on his own. You don't have to worry, I already told him he wasn't allowed to reveal it."

"......Oh, so that's how it is. But I also heard rumors about you that during the spiritual disaster outbreak two years ago, you conducted a large-scale investigation of the Lingering Spirit Division."

"No....." Hirata's expression quickly became downcast after Ohtomo spoke.

"In the end, I still wasn't in time to stop the spiritual disaster, and the prime suspect Dairenji Shidou was killed before his arrest. I still feel at fault."

Hirata's voice sank as he replied honestly. After he said this, Amami urged him to sit, so he sat down next to his boss.

The Twin-Horned Syndicate was a secret society composed of Yakou fanatics, and the Mystical Investigator who had attacked Natsume was connected to the Twin-Horned Syndicate, which had already been verified by the investigation after the incident. The size of the organization was unclear, as well as when it had

begun, and even their true goal was still pending further investigation.

The Onmyou Agency noticed the Twin-Horned Syndicate because of the incident two years ago. The Twin-Horned Syndicate had initiated simultaneous spiritual disasters within Tokyo, forcing the Onmyou Agency to hold a large-scale magic ceremony that was named the 'Great Hinamatsuri Purification'. It was the first-ever 'spiritual terrorism attack' in history.

The prime suspect of this incident was a National First-Class Onmyouji, the 'Professor' Dairenji Shidou. The 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka who had held the Taizan Fukun Ritual the previous summer was his daughter.

".....Dairenji was outstanding, but unfortunately he was a dangerous person. We noticed that he admired Yakou long ago. He was influenced by his environment, after all." Amami played with the wineglass in his hand, recounting past events in a serious tone.

When the incident had happened Dairenji Shidou hadn't been a member of the Onmyou Agency. When specialized Onmyouji were brought up, one would

naturally associate it with Onmyou Agency members, but actually there were quite a few Onmyouji who chose to live within the populace or in the government, and the Onmyou Agency wasn't the only organization that used Onmyouji.

The most particularly troublesome organization that used Onmyouji was the Lingering Spirit Division.

".....Like it's name, the Lingering Spirit Division is responsible for investigating and researching 'mitama' - in other words, the disastrous and harmonious parts of ' ara-mitama' or 'nigi-mitama',[8] and....."

".....That Lingering Spirit Division was a branch underneath the Imperial Household Agency[9]. It doesn't belong to the Onmyou Agency, and so it's not easy to touch them, even if the Mystical Investigators want to."

When Hirata explained halfway, Amami continued the explanation of the situation back then.

Going by the current definition of 'General Onmyoudou' that the Onmyou Agency used, 'mitama' generally referred to a special type of spiritual disaster, where certain people with strong spiritual power who

fulfilled a certain condition would leave behind a spiritual body and become the core of a special spiritual disaster. The objects of the Lingering Spirit Division's research were the deities of the past, and their department was established with its goal as deriving an explanation from the angle of magic.

As for why the Lingering Spirit Division had been established under the Imperial Household Agency and not the Onmyou Agency, the most important factor was because mitama included 'spirits of nobility'. For example, of the tales mentioned in the 'Nihon Ryoiki' such as Prince Nagaya, Prince Sawara who cursed Nagaokakyou, Sugawara no Michizane that became the god of thunder, or the aristocrat and imperial families that died unnatural deaths, most became mitama. Because they had to deal with these mitama of nobility, the government judged that the Imperial Household Agency was more suitable than the Onmyou Agency.

".....Though you say that, quite a few disputes arose when the Lingering Spirit Division was established, and because it was quite closed off, the outside community didn't get any information from within, at least that was the case before Hirata entered undercover."

"......Then after you entered, you noticed it had already become the Twin-Horned Syndicate's den - Is that right?"

"Exactly so."

Mitama were 'souls' turned into spiritual disasters. Trying to explain them from the angle of General Onmyoudou would inevitably lead into the Imperial Onmyoudou that Yakou established, as well as 'soul magic' from the same source. Of course, magic related to souls had all been classified as forbidden magic, but in the end, General-style was a system of magic developed using Imperial-style as a basis. If one tried to seek a suitable answer using the angle of General-style, he would have to end up investigating Imperial-style.

The more one understood Imperial-style, the deeper one would feel fascinated by Tsuchimikado Yakou, the great Onmyouji who had established this system, and that was why the Lingering Spirit Division would become Yakou fanatics - the hotbed of the Twin-Horned Syndicate. It actually wasn't unexpected, in a certain sense.

"The Dairenji Shidou we mentioned before was the Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division

Chief at the time..... More than half of his subordinates were members of the Twin-Horned Syndicate. He personally planned and actually carried out the spiritual disaster attack."

After the incident had happened, the Exorcist Bureau managed after many hardships to purify the human-induced spiritual disaster. However, the prime suspect Dairenji Shidou had lost his life while bringing about the spiritual disaster. The Mystical Investigators arrested the Twin-Horned Syndicate members inside the Lingering Spirit Division, and the Lingering Spirit Division itself was forced to close and dissolve. Hirata was the person who commanded the Mystical Investigators' actions at the time, as he had sneaked into the Lingering Spirit Division beforehand to investigate.

"But all we dug up back then was just the tip of the iceberg, and we didn't arrest all of the members related to the incident. As you can see from the event this summer that was brought about by a Mystical Investigator[10], the Twin-Horned Syndicate's strength is still here, and it hasn't stopped living. I fear the Onmyou Agency is also..... Ah, sorry, I don't need to say such things since Ohtomo-senpai is also very knowledgeable, since you were the one who noticed the Twin-Horned

Syndicate's existence first and the first person to conduct a deep solo investigation after all."

"No, don't say that." Ohtomo hurriedly waved his arm upon hearing Hirata prudently supplement his words.

"I quit my Mystical Investigator work a long time ago. Also, could you not call me 'senpai'? Still being called that now feels weird in some way."

"Right, the future's promising young man doesn't need to put this kind of person on a pedestal."

"Chief, you can really talk..... It would be nice if the old geezer with no future could be a bit more considerate ."

"Hehehe, I refuse."

Hirata blankly watched the composed Amami and the angry Ohtomo from the side, finally uttering with a wry smile: "I'll do as you say, Ohtomo-'san'."

"Anyways..... We drew out the first part too much, but it's relevant to the important point I called you here for today."

Tap. Amami tapped his knee with his fan, leaning forward. Wariness and caution appeared in plain view on Ohtomo's undisguised expression.

".....First off, it's true that I'm an Onmyouji, but I'm just a normal person, a mere lecturer."

"I have reason to look for a lecturer like you. The situation is related to the 'candidate' you mentioned earlier."

After that was said, the frivolous air vanished again from Ohtomo's body. Amami couldn't help but laugh secretly upon seeing that.

"And I thought your personality wasn't suitable for being a teacher..... As expected of Miyo-chan, she sees people pretty accurately."

"Don't waste your breath, what connection is there exactly between the incident two years ago and the Onmyou Academy students?"

Ohtomo impatiently urged Amami to hurry up and say it. Amami made a 'nn' sound, glancing towards Hirata. Hirata quickly continued speaking.

"Chief Amami said there were two 'relationships'. Actually, at this time, we haven't grasped any movement towards the 'candidate' - that kind of name is really roundabout, since after all the Twin-Horned Syndicate hasn't yet taken the rumor that the Tsuchimikado's heir - Tsuchimikado Natsume is Yakou's reincarnation to heart. But with the incident that just happened last summer, we figured that we should first inform you."

"......Sorry, but it's your manner of speaking that should really be called roundabout. Can you say it directly?"

Ohtomo spoke calmly, and Hirata stopped immediately, nodding his head to express approval.

"We noticed that the Twin-Horned Syndicate has started moving recently, and there's a big shot instigating them from behind the scenes."

"A big shot..... Could it be 'D'?"

"It's the 'D' file. He's related to the incident last summer. You should have known that long ago, right?"

"I did know..... I mean, he came to the Onmyou Academy himself."

Ohtomo couldn't help but reply with a frown once he thought of the incident last summer.

'D' was a secret code used inside the Mystical Investigators that referred to a certain Onmyouji hiding behind the scenes of the magic community. That Onmyouji's true identity was a mystery, but not a single practitioner of magic hadn't heard rumors about his famous name.

Ashiya Doman, also known as Domahoshi,[11] who was rumored to have fought Abe no Seimei, a truly legendary Onmyouji.

The backdrop of the legend was a thousand years ago in the Heian period, and it was pending confirmation whether this 'D' was the original Ashiya Doman, but at the least, this mysterious Onmyouji truly existed, and the Mystical Investigators judged this person to be a real threat.

"'D' has been quite active recently. A few days ago, we caught 'D' contacting a member of the Twin-Horned Syndicate."

"......Who?"

"An Onmyouji of the former Lingering Spirit Division, Mutobe Chihiro. That man was Dairenji Shidou's former right-hand man."

Part 4

The Shibuya night was brightly lit, and the streetlights still illuminated the night sky like bonfires burning in the night, even far away from downtown. Touji silently stared into the misty night on the roof of the dorm.

In February the night was still as cold and windy as winter, and wind would often blow Touji's hair. He leaned on the railing, his right hand lifting the bangs over his forehead. The bandanna that normally wrapped around his head was taken off in his left hand, and due to the bandanna that was almost his trademark, the current him gave off somewhat of a different impression than usual.

Just then, the door to the roof opened, and he reflexively brought up the bandanna. But--

".....So it was you."

The person who appeared in the rooftop door was Harutora. Touji instantly relaxed, leaning back onto the railing.

Harutora had a can of coffee in either hand. It seemed that he had long since known that Touji was on the roof. He called out, walking up to Touji.

"What's up, punk. The atmosphere seems like you're missing a cigarette."

"Shut up, I don't smoke or drink."

The two of them teased each other like the past, and then Harutora said the word "Here.", tossing a can of coffee to Touji. Touji didn't especially thank him, silently taking the coffee from his good friend.

Harutora smiled lightly.

"Can't sleep, Touji?"

"Why did you come here?'

"Hmm? Uh, well..... When I thought of the exam tomorrow deciding my future fate, I became too nervous to sleep."

Harutora lowered his head, dropping his gaze to his hands as he pulled open the tab on the coffee can. Touji's mouth curved into a mocking smile as he looked at Harutora's appearance.

"......What an idiot....."

"Hmm? What did you say?"

"Nothing."

Touji shrugged his shoulders at the clueless Harutora and then pulled on his tab as well, bringing the coffee can to his lips. Touji drank a sugarless coffee while Harutora's was slightly sweet. They had long since known each other's likes, so checking the marking on the can was superfluous.

"Come to think of it..... I never expected they would want us to purify a spiritual disaster, that's only something that you would see on TV. I thought I was used to it already, but the Onmyou Academy really is random."

Harutora's face sank as he spoke.

Touji had revealed the contents of the exam to Harutora and the others on the road to the dorm. Natsume and the others had seemed a bit opposed to learning the exam topic beforehand, but they hadn't spoken up to stop him.

"Can students like us successfully purify a spiritual disaster?"

"Purification methods were taught in the curriculum, right? I heard that we'll first have preliminary review tomorrow and then begin the exam in the evening. Also, what's important for the exam are your preparation and ability to respond rather than whether you can actually purify or not. Moreover, we're just purifying a spiritual disaster that's around phase one."

"It's a spiritual disaster no matter how low the phase is . If I recall, phase one is..... a spiritual disaster that won't harm physical beings, right?"

"Right, they can only harm physical beings when it reaches phase two. Phase one is 'a degree of aura distortion that cannot naturally recover', so it's not truly an 'aura-triggered disaster', but just a first stage. Professional exorcists would only need two or three

people to handle the purification, and we have the whole class..... It's just that the teachers seem to be planning on not letting Natsume help with the purification at the start ." Touji replied to Harutora's question with a calm tone.

Not letting Natsume participate in the exam was because she had a trump card - the servant shikigami Hokuto.

Hokuto was a dragon, a spiritual beast that had served the Tsuchimikado family for generations. Just by using Hokuto's spiritual pressure, a phase one spiritual disaster could be forced to 'scatter', so though they would allow Natsume to participate in the exam, they wanted her to assist from behind as much as possible - Principal Kurahashi had explained.

"With that, Natsume pretty much doesn't need to take the exam."

"The Onmyou Academy emphasizes power, and they probably judged that there was no reason for Natsume to be tested."

"That's great, Natsume. Well, mortals like us can only properly take the exam."

Harutora drank his coffee, looking into the night sky, and Touji also looked up.

The hot coffee became steam, and the two of them exhaled plumes of white fog out of their mouths.

The hazy night sky was all around them, keeping them from seeing everything. Even the moon and stars hanging high in the night sky seemed cold and emotionless.

"......This place is completely different from the countryside."

"......Yeah."

Touji echoed Harutora's words, but actually he had lived in Tokyo until a year ago. Even if he looked up at the same night sky, he had a greatly different sensation than Harutora. It was like the thought of 'returning home ' was more intense, or perhaps like 'he never thought he would return again'.....

Soon after, Harutora called out, looking up at the night sky: "......Touji."

"What?"

"Are you doing fine recently?"

"The same."

"That's not what I meant, uh....."

Harutora stared straight into the night sky, his words choppy. Touji shook his head and sighed helplessly in his heart, but a bitter smile emerged on his face.

"I said it was the same. There aren't any big changes, whether in body or mind..... Though I've been more clearly conscious of the aura from my own body this half-year."

"So you can control it, for the most part?"

".....Should be. At least it won't easily develop to a degree that would worry you, even if a spiritual disaster occurs right in front of me."

"Well, you're full of self-confidence as usual."

"To put it better, I'm actually just arrogant."

Touji shrugged his shoulders as he said this. Seeing his good friend's attitude, Harutora finally smiled in

reassurance, but unlike the expression on his face, he continued to say:

"It's really nerve-wracking. Everything will be alright if you can really control it, but I'm afraid that things will go bad if you get careless."

"You don't need to worry. Thanks to your dad, the treatment had quite good effects. He even considered the practical curriculum of the Onmyou Academy and helped me deal with it step by step. But I still can't be too reckless..... I can only leave that heavy responsibility to you."

"Pff, that's all I can do anyway."

"It's good that you're self-aware."

"Hmph, thanks for the appreciation."

Harutora smiled, finishing the coffee in his hand with a gulp. After drinking it, he lightly muttered the word " bye", turning around and leaving accordingly. Touji also briefly muttered the word "yeah".

But, just as Harutora put his hand on the door handle, he turned around again and called out: "Touji." Then he grinned.

"Do your best on the exam tomorrow."

"Hey, don't forget that you're the one whose successful advancement is reliant on the exam tomorrow, not me."

"Well..... Worry me after I wake up." Harutora said good night and then opened the door, walking off the roof.

Touji stayed on the roof by himself for a while and finally took a sip of coffee soon after.

".....No wonder they're father and son, they express their concern at the exact same time."

He smiled a bit helplessly, carefully tasting the remaining coffee, and left the roof to prepare for tomorrow's examination.

...The incident that would later be named the ' Hinamatsuri Repurification' would happen one night later.

Chapter 2 - Spring Tempest

Part 1

The first control room of the Onmyou Agency's Exorcist Bureau was abnormally chaotic that day. Once the afternoon was over, many spiritual disasters had happened in Tokyo.

These spiritual disasters were mostly phase two disasters that began as phase ones, and they were relatively small-scale, but it was rare to see this many spiritual disasters happen before sunset. Most spiritual disasters happened from the evening until late night - especially during Omagatoki[12] and Ushimitsudoki [13]. They plummeted when the sun came out. The fact that spiritual disasters were occurring consecutively during the day was the best evidence that the aura inside the city was chaotic.

And, it was soon going to be sunset - time to enter Omagatoki.

"......It seems like we'll be busy tonight." The room supervisor sat on a seat in the room, speaking with a bitter face.

A huge screen was set up in the control room, on which a map was shown with Tokyo as the center. The positions of the spiritual disasters that had happened today were represented on this simple map with some related data.

"Do we need to contact the chief?" The control personnel next to the supervisor asked.

"No, we don't need to bother him. I heard that his blood pressure has been high recently, so let's look out for the chief's health... Actually, we don't have any reason to. Okay, put me on the line."

"Supervisor!"

The worktime joke made the room fill with laughter, and of course the specialized control personnel laughed back, though their attention never left the console. It was true that relieving emotional tension in a timely manner was important, but the sun was about to be in the west, and the tense atmosphere was unabated.

To a normal person who didn't care about magic, the Onmyou Agency was a 'government agency that purified spiritual disasters', and they lumped the Exorcist Bureau

and the Onmyou Agency together, equating exorcists and Onmyouji. That was naturally a mistaken way of thinking, and actually only a small portion of excellent Onmyouji could become exorcists, and quite a few other non-Onmyouji workers held positions inside the Onmyou Agency and the Exorcist Bureau.

Of those belonging to the first control room of the Exorcist Intelligence Bureau, only the supervisor and several other workers had passed the 'Third-Class Onmyou' exam, and not a single one had Second-Class qualifications. They weren't permitted to use first-class magic - it was a group of workers far distant from the ' Onmyouji' that ordinary people imagined.

However, the Exorcist Bureau workers had to rely on the abilities of this group to operate smoothly. In the eyes of people familiar with magic, exorcism was an admirable industry, but exorcists could only take the stage without worry because they had these workers assisting from behind.

".....Speak of the devil. As expected of the chief, he has ears everywhere."

The supervisor stuck his tongue out jokingly, looking at his boss - the Exorcist Intelligence Bureau Chief who walked into the control room with his unchangingly serious face. Actually, the chief didn't have anything like ears everywhere, it was the Intelligence Bureau Chief's everyday routine to come to the control room to check the situation at this time.

The chief walked up to the supervisor's work desk, glancing hastily at the screen and then raising his eyebrow lightly.

"......The sun's not down yet, there's a few too many spiritual disasters."

"Quite some spiritual disasters happened, maybe it'll top this year's record."

"It's only been a month since the February exorcism..... Seems like exorcisms are getting less and less effective."

"More accurately, the effects started becoming weaker after work came from the Lingering Spirit Division." The supervisor spoke mockingly, and the chief's expression couldn't help but become grim upon hearing that.

The February exorcism meant the Setsubun ceremony held a day before the beginning of spring. 'Setsubun' was basically around the fourth of February every year, and was most famous for it's 'mamemaki[14]' ritual. In fact, every year there wasn't only a Setsubun the day before the beginning of spring. There were also festivals held the days before the beginning of summer, fall, and winter . The current Onmyou Agency had also added New Year's Eve in order to stabilize the aura in the city, and held five magic ceremonies per year. Spiritual disasters arose because of aura distortions, so it was necessary to regulate the flow of aura and keep the aura from easily fluctuating.

This work didn't originally belong to the Onmyou Agency, but to the Imperial Household Agency instead, and the Lingering Spirit Division had been responsible for carrying it out.

"I really can't see any difference with my meager spirit-seeing ability. What about you, Chief? I remember you had Second-Class qualifications."

"Actually, I can't see much difference either..... But the data doesn't lie. Judging by the data on spiritual disaster numbers, spiritual disasters are truly tending to increase year by year. It really gives me a headache."

The Exorcist Bureau had quite a severe problem of insufficient manpower, and the portion of members using paid holiday leave was becoming lower and lower, but the work couldn't be performed properly if there weren't enough members coming to work. The choice between the two was really a headache for the management personnel in the middle.

"Hmm? What's up with that spiritual disaster? It's already been a very long time since it happened, how come it hasn't been dealt with?"

The chief suddenly stared at the screen and asked.

"Huh? Which one are you talking about?" The supervisor followed, looking at the screen.

"That one, the phase one that happened in Shibuya."

"Oh, you mean that one. Didn't a notice arrive yesterday? It said the Onmyou Academy--"

Upon hearing this, the chief instantly showed a look of comprehension.

"The ones who said they wanted an artificial spiritual disaster for examination purposes, does it really need to be marked?"

"In the end, a spiritual disaster still happened."

No one other than those with spirit-seeing abilities could observe aura. Hence, no system for automatically detecting spiritual disasters had yet been invented, and they relied on Onmyouji with particularly outstanding spirit-sensing abilities - positions known as Spirit Sensors - to monitor the aura inside the city. The Onmyouji who went to the scene following the information they provided would report the actual situation to the Intelligence Bureau. So, the information displayed on the screen had been collected through various means. Even now, the phones of workers around the area were still ringing nonstop inside the control room.

Though Spirit Sensors weren't very prominent, they were important people that the Exorcist Bureau couldn't go without. Actually, there were three National First-Class Onmyouji among the current Spirit Sensors.

"But, how worthy of the Onmyou Academy, to think they would want their students to exorcise a phase one artificial spiritual disaster during an exam. That's basically industry training."

"The graduates from that place are indeed quite outstanding. Haven't more than half of the exorcists recently been from the Onmyou Academy?"

"Maybe that's true. The students who pass the exam this time might enter the Exorcist Bureau in the future."

The supervisor showed a slight smile, looking at the Shibuya indicator on the screen. The number of people who were gifted and who could become Onmyouji was extremely limited, and hence excellent Onmyouji were even more clearly valuable.

Unfortunately, what happened next made him stop smiling.

A phone ring sounded from the console in the control room, and one of the control personnel manipulated the console, taking the phone call through his headset. Immediately after, one phone after another began ringing , a new one ringing as soon as another was picked up.

The control personnel hastily picked up the phones one by one, but were still overwhelmed by the sound of ringing phones.

"...Hmm?"

The supervisor sat upright. The phones were still ringing nonstop, and the tones of the control personnel picking up the phones became more and more frantic.

".....What's going on, did something happen?" Just as the supervisor wondered in incomprehension - "There's a spiritual disaster! The location is Ueno[15], and according to the report of the bureau member who just arrived, the scale of the spiritual disaster is approaching phase two!"

"According to the report of the Meguro[16] branch, a spiritual disaster is also happening in Shinagawa[17]! They predict they will arrive at the scene in a few minutes!"

"Report from the sixth team! The spiritual disaster undergoing purification suddenly rose to a phase two and the spiritual pressure is still continuing to rise, please provide assistance!"

The control personnel frantically reported the situations. The stunned supervisor unhurriedly replied with orders one by one. Just as he was thinking about contacting the Exorcist Command Center of the management exorcists, the phone on his work desk rang preemptively. The phone on his desk was different from the consoles the control personnel supervised, as it was specially used for contacting the Spirit Sensors.

The supervisor picked up the receiver, and after only a few words he raised his voice and shouted: "What did you say!" The face of the Chief who was observing the situation from the side sank upon hearing that.

"...What's happened?"

"The Spirit Sensors reported that the spirit flow is chaotic, and abnormalities have emerged."

"What's the location?"

"That....."

"What? Hurry up and say."

".....The e, entire city..... At least, the Spirit Sensors noticed that there were abnormal phenomena in all of the spirit flow within the range that they can check."

The chief quickly turned his gaze towards the screen once he received the report. The information the control personnel received from the scenes were displayed on it, and spiritual disaster warnings were indeed lighting up in twos and threes.

"Immediately contact the three Special Sensors and ask them to provide detailed reports. I'll contact the Control Center, and also..... Who's on standby among the Independent Officers?" The chief gave orders with a sharp gaze.

Special Sensor was an abbreviation for special Spirit Sensors, and Independent Officers meant independent

exorcists. The two of them were special titles that only National First-Class Exorcists could possess.

"Miyachi-san and Yuge are at headquarters, and Kogure's at Meguro..... Kagami's still left." The supervisor replied, hastily checking the time.

Immediately after - "S, Sixth team report! The scope of the spiritual disaster has reached phase three!"

"What!" The chief and supervisor's eyes both inadvertently widened.

"Isn't that a bit too fast, didn't it just reach phase two?"

"Where's the sixth team!"

"Akihabara[18]! They're sending back an image!"

As the control personnel spoke, he widened an image of the scene displayed in the corner of the screen.

The situation in an Akihabara parking lot appeared on the screen. As could be told from the Kanda River[19] in the image, the location of the spiritual disaster was happening on one side of Mansei Bridge[20]. The chief

couldn't help but click his tongue, as the Chuo Main Line [21] passed through one side and it was currently the after-work rush hour.

Several black-clothed figures were shown in the image - exorcists wearing miasma protection clothing. In front of their gazes, pillars of water spurted forth from the Kanda River.

The pillars of water gushed up towards the sunset, like a tornado that was rapidly turning and gradually expanding. It looked a lot like computer graphics, but on one corner of the screen, the reactions of the surrounding people - since the incident had happened so suddenly, they hadn't had enough time to lead the normal citizens to safety - were quite real.

Aura couldn't be seen through the screen even with spirit-sensing abilities. How chaotic the aura was and how wild the miasma was at the location could only be judged through the reports of the exorcists present.

'...This is the sixth team! We can't maintain the barrier with just our strength! The spiritual disaster is still continuing to expand, reaching phase three!'

The voices of the exorcists at the scene sounded through the entire control room. It was supposedly a report, but it was actually closer to a scream, and even the control personnel responsible for taking his call unconsciously raised his head, staring at the screen.

Under the gazes of the control room personnel, the pillars of water ruptured with a crash.

A strange figure leaped towards the sunset. That thing's four limbs and body were distorted, and a long tail grew out of it. Its entire body was more than five meters long, and its figure soaring in the air was agile and extremely vibrant, like a wild animal broken free of its cage.

Then, a shrill roar emitted from its fanged jaws like a broken whistle.

A phase three. Materialized miasma, a 'demon'.

Onmyoudou defined them as spiritual-based disasters that had the ability to move - named 'mobile spiritual disasters'.

'Seventeen fifteen[22], a mobile spiritual disaster has occurred! The water vapor is intense, strongly suspected

to be a five-element mix, judged to be Type-Chimera[23]- a Nue[24]!'

"To think a Nue would come out." The supervisor spoke gravely upon hearing the exorcist's report.

"That belongs to a flying-type spiritual disaster, this will be troublesome."

"...Control personnel! Tell the sixth team that they need to stop the spiritual disaster moving with everything they have! .....Urgently contact the Command Center and ask the team on standby to provide emergency assistance--"

The chief roared at the control personnel right next to the supervisor's ears, immediately dealing with the situation. The Exorcist Command Center was usually responsible for ordering the Spiritual Disaster Exorcist teams, but since the Intelligence Bureau Chief held a post as a member of the Exorcist Command Center, he could take command in certain emergency situations.

Just then, another report came to the control room like it was mocking his response.

"Supervisor! From Ueno - the spiritual disaster has suddenly risen to phase three!"

"Wha.....!"

"It's currently judged to be Type-Chimera! This is a Nue as well, it's already created damage to the surrounding--"

"Wait! A report came from the team arriving in Shinagawa confirming that a mobile spiritual disaster is happening in the area! Please send emergency reinforcements!"

Reports flooded the control room one after another, and the chief and supervisor couldn't help but gasp. No, not just them, the control personnel responsible for transmitting the reports were also pale.

Three spiritual disasters had successively entered phase three, and though this situation was extremely rare , it wasn't unprecedented. The Intelligence Bureau personnel weren't so petrified just because of the serious situation, but more because this was already the 'second time' this kind of situation had appeared.

A situation similar to right now had happened once in the past.

"......It couldn't be..... The incident two years ago is happening again....." It was unknown which control personnel couldn't help but murmur, uttering the feelings of everyone in the area. It had been March two years ago that spiritual disasters had successively happened just like right now - no, they were mostly human-incited spiritual disasters.

"Could this be..... a spiritual disaster attack?" The supervisor murmured blankly.

"Don't guess randomly." The chief quickly snapped back.

"In any case, it's an emergency situation, so contact Chief Kurahashi immediately! Also..... the Spirit Sensor's reports mentioned that the spirit flow appeared chaotic, right?"

"Yes..... Ah, right! Akihabara, Ueno, Shinagawa..." The Chief's words suddenly made the supervisor realize.

Among the Onmyoudou concepts of orientation[25], there was a direction called the 'Demon Gate[26]' known as 'ushitora'[27], which was northeast and the 'direction through which demons enter the world', requiring strict vigilance and prevention. Also, the direction opposite from the Demon Gate - the southwest 'hitsujisaru' - was the 'Rear Demon Gate[28]' and was also a direction that required caution.

General Onmyoudou inherited such directional concepts, but didn't just consider directions, it merged them with 'spiritual flows' that were paths aura flowed through and also considered social factors such as transportation networks. The reason for this change was because people more or less essentially carried aura, and the movement of large amounts of people would create new spiritual flows over a long time.

According to General-style, Tokyo's current Demon Gate was located in Ueno and Akihabara, and the Rear Demon Gate was in Shinagawa and Shibuya. Three of the mobile spiritual disaster locations had been at the Demon Gate and Rear Demon Gate.

As if confirming the chief's speculation - "A new spiritual disaster is happening! The scale is rapidly expanding!" One of the control personnel yelled loudly. The chief and supervisor clenched their teeth, having the same premonitions, and asked the same question at almost the same time.

"Where is it?"

The answer was just as the two had predicted.

The control personnel turned around, replying with a shaking voice:

"Shibuya."

The man took the Yamanote Line outbound train.

He sat in his seat with his head raised high and his legs spread wide. Since it was the after-work rush hour, the train compartment was full to bursting, but the seats in either direction of the man were empty without any passengers. Even though there were often people in the distance who glanced furtively in the man's direction, no one dared to approach him, each and every one of them keeping away from him, scared of the violent air emanating from his body.

The man was about twenty years old. His body was skinny, with an almost sharply angled chin and a head of short hair dyed silver. He had sunglasses with silvered lenses on his face, with several piercings in his ears. He wore a fur-collared jacket, with a sparkling necklace draped over his chest and a belt decorated with silver rivets tied around his waist. Silver chains were hung on his jeans, and his feet were in a pair of bright, polished engineer boots.

A cold smile was on the man's lips like he was ridiculing the entire world. An intense beat came from the headphones in his ears. Even if he didn't say a word, his unruly arrogance could be felt in abundance.

One of the most frightening parts was the scar on his forehead. On the man's forehead was carved an 'X' that seemed like a blade wound.

Suddenly, a ringtone sounded from inside the man's jacket. He creased his eyebrows, taking out the phone. His fingers were unexpectedly thin and long, and every finger wore a flashing ring.

He looked at the screen of his phone, clicking his tongue forcefully in displeasure.

".....Unexpected overtime."

Not long after, the train reached the JR Shinjuku[29] stop. The man briskly stood up from his seat, pushing through the passengers orderly leaving the train and forcefully and leisurely left the compartment and walked onto the platform. The criticizing gazes never met the man, dissipating powerlessly into the air.

The evening twilight shone on the sunglasses, momentarily lighting the man's face vividly.

Part 2

The tragedy happened by surprise.

"Very good, alright, put more effort into it!"

"Okay!" The people replied energetically to Kyouko's shout, and of course Harutora was among them. Kon breathed shallowly by Harutora's feet, Kachiwari grasped in her hand and taking up a ready stance.

The students in Harutora's class were gathered on a tile-covered space like a small plaza between the sidewalk and the lobby of an office building in a corner of Shibuya. The exam was in progress.

The spiritual disaster had happened in the center of the plaza, and the ying energy in the aura was particularly heavy, pressing heavily on the tiles like a gas heavier than air - though it couldn't spread.

Looking at the current situation, the aura had already turned into miasma, like a violent invisible campfire whose heat could be felt even from far away. Even though it didn't create any physical harm, the psychological effect and the spiritual trauma that the body endured weren't to be underestimated.

The methods for purifying spiritual disasters were different for each situation, but the basic order of things was mostly the same. First, a barrier would be set to isolate the spiritual disaster, lowering the damage done to the surroundings. At the same time, the aura's deviation would be analyzed, and the next step would be to add a correction or cast a stronger magical pressure to 'scatter' it completely.

Harutora and the other students were separated into two groups. One group immediately set down a barrier to isolate the spiritual disaster, and the other group was responsible for casting magic, trying to correct the aura. Kyouko and Touji were in the former and Harutora and Tenma were in the latter, but Natsume was standing by herself next to the proctoring teacher, anxiously watching the examination progress from afar.

"Uuu... I'm going to throw up....."

"Get a grip, Tenma! Breathe deeply - no wait, it'll be bad if you breathe in the miasma. Anyway, just hold on, just hold on for a while!"

"H-H, Harutora-sama! Please order this servant to attack--!"

"No! The goal of the exam isn't to beat down the miasma, but to restore the aura's balance. Everyone in the class is working as one, don't think of going wild on your own!"

"Calm down, everyone! Separate the barrier properly! It's no problem even if we spend some time, we'll definitely correct this aura. The purification is going very smoothly, don't worry!"

One got more sensitive as he came in contact with aura , and it would be easier to be affected by spiritual disasters. It was especially difficult to maintain calm when being assaulted by miasma. Kyouko, whose strength was inferior only to Natsume, was in charge of maintaining the barrier, because unless the person had power to spare, it was not possible to hold up the barrier against a spiritual disaster for a long time.

"Are you alright, Touji? I remember that you were hurt in a spiritual disaster, right?" Kyouko maintained the barrier while leading the students, and didn't forget to heed the condition of Touji next to her.

Touji's face was looking abnormally bad, but his eyes stared straight at the spiritual disaster, never once looking away, his expression also unmoving. "......I'm fine ." He replied, his mouth showing a self-confident smile.

"You don't need to worry, I'm controlling it very appropriately. It won't be a problem even if I have to hold on for a while."

Kyouko thought Touji was talking about 'controlling the barrier appropriately', hence she laughed and said: " I'm the one controlling it."

The barrier group had surrounded the spiritual disaster to form a circle. Each person set down a barrier in their surroundings, and then Kyouko connected these barriers together to form a complete barrier.

But, the students who were responsible for correcting the aura and who actually carried out the purification had to enter the barrier, directly applying their magical

energy towards the spiritual disaster. Among them, there were people who used specialized charms, people who formed kuji seals[30], and various people who pulled out all the stops. On the other hand, as originally expected, the shakujou that Ohtomo had made for Harutora was not allowed to be brought into the exam, so Harutora could only desperately and rapidly slash one haya-kuji[31] after another.

He raised his forefinger and middle finger high to create the 'blade seal'[32], yelling: "Rin! Kyo! Toh! Sha! Kai! Jin! Retsu! Zai! Zen!" Every time he chanted a word, he drew out five horizontal lines going to the left and right and then four vertical lines going up and down. As his 'blade seal'-forming fingers slashed through the air, the magical energy gathered in his fingers left a grid of light in midair, forming the 'doman'[33], a magical pattern on par with the pentagram.

There were a variety of 'kuji' magic methods used for exorcism, and the simplest among them was haya-kuji, with which someone skilled could rapidly exert his power. Of course, Harutora could only used this move because it was easy to remember.

The actions of the exorcism group were clearly chaotic compared to the barrier group,

"Harutora, your magical energy is too strong! Weaken it a little."

"What are you doing - Harutora-kun, it's too weak this time! Can you not control your magical energy!"

"Where are you casting your magic, Tsucchi, you're not facing the target! Can you not see the spiritual disaster in front of you!"

"My fault? Everything's my fault? You people can't be blaming me for your and everyone else's mistakes, right? "

Harutora's spiritual power was the greatest, but he wasn't good at turning his spiritual power into magical energy. Not only did he make mistakes frequently, his magical energy wasn't stable either, and it was depleted violently but didn't return any significant effects. Fortunately, his spiritual power was particularly robust, so he wasn't exhausted.

Natsume who was watching everything from afar couldn't restrain herself, verbally correcting him.

"Your hand seals are simply bad! Your blade seal should be like this! You have to cut with your fingers like this!"

"How can you see me making seals when you're standing that far away! And also, I understand the basics like the blade seal!"

"H, H-H-Harutora-sama, i-it must be formed like this--!"

"Kon, you know how to make the seals too? But don't float in front of me! You're blocking my view! I can't see in front of me!"

"......It's so nauseating, my head hurts, I'm going to die....."

As Harutora shouted angrily at Natsume and Kon, Tenma finally collapsed unsupported. It wouldn't be a problem to keep the barrier up for some time, but it seemed like they would still need to spend a very long time purifying the spiritual disaster itself.

"Tch..... Sensei, I won't summon Hokuto, so please let me join the exam!"

Natsume made a request of a proctoring teacher, seeming like she could no longer bear stand still. Several teachers looked at each other, repressing their wry smiles .

The homeroom teacher Ohtomo wasn't at the exam site because he had business, but in consideration of the dangerous content of the exam, the practical examination this time had three teachers proctoring together. One of them was of advanced age, but he was a seasoned former exorcist.

"The important thing about purifying spiritual disasters is teamwork. Once you get used to borrowing the strength of others, it's certainly difficult to grow as an individual. The important meaning of this exam right now is for them to understand their own power in a situation without your participation, regardless of whether they successfully purify the spiritual disaster or not." The elderly former exorcist warned Natsume, speaking clearly and logically. Natsume looked utterly unconvinced, but she couldn't rebut at all since the teacher spoke reason.

However, the old instructor showed a smile again very quickly.

"......But the goal of the exam isn't truly to have you all purify a spiritual disaster. Actually, it's about time to deal with it." He checked the time on his watch as he said this.

The sun was gradually tilting to the west, and the streetlights around them lit up one by one. Onmyoudou called dusk 'Omagatoki', and also named it the 'time of disaster', the moment when calamity would arrive. Spiritual disasters mostly began becoming active from this time onwards, and hence it was very possible that continuing the exam would bring disaster.

When the old instructor had just decided to allow Natsume to participate in the exam, a phone ringtone suddenly sounded. The old instructor started in surprise when he saw caller's name, hastily picking up the phone.

"Principal? What is it? ...Yes, we're still holding the exam here... Yes."

As could be heard from the old instructor's words, the person who called was Principal Kurahashi. The other two proctoring teachers were also perplexed, perking up their ears to listen to the conversation of the two.

Just then--

".....Huh? Hey, it looks like something's not right."

"S, Strange, this is..... Is the aura getting stronger?"

The students suddenly became restless. Natsume's heart leaped and she turned her attention back to the spiritual disaster.

Surrounded by several students, the spiritual pressure of the phase one artificial spiritual disaster was violently increasing. The originally gas-like impression that it gave off gradually became thicker. Then, with a crash, the tiles underneath cracked apart.

"Strengthen the barrier! Exorcist group, more magical energy! Keep the spiritual disaster from expanding!"

Kyouko quickly spoke orders once she noticed the abnormal situation. Her voice was more urgent than before, and the students' expressions changed, then - as expected of Onmyou Academy students - they used their full power to purify the spiritual disaster, following Kyouko's orders.

The magical energy released by the students increased, but it seemed ineffective, and the spiritual disaster's spiritual pressure rose sharply.

"Sensei!"

Natsume frantically turned her head to look at the teacher, but the three proctoring teachers had long since rushed besides the students with dark faces, raising their magical energy in a snap.

"Barrier group, continue as before! Exorcist group, quickly retreat outside the barrier - Kurahashi! Can you hold on for one more minute?"

"Yes, no problem!"

"Okay, one teacher assist the barrier! All students, be sure to stay calm and act quickly!"

The old instructor's voice was full of vigor. He sounded extremely pressing, but he allowed the listeners to calm their minds and momentarily relax.

One teacher stood next to Kyouko assisting the barrier, and the barrier's strength multiplied. The old instructor

and the other teacher replaced Harutora, Tenma, and the others who had left the barrier, rushing inside.

"...With the mortal world under my control, I subdue this evil spirit in the name of Acala's oath! On bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka![34]"

The instructor cast a spellbinding seal added on to a Dharmacakra seal,[35] namely the Unmoving Golden Chains[36] magic, fiercely unleashing a strong magic incomparable to the students' at the spiritual disaster.

The gradually expanding spiritual disaster distorted and changed shape under the blow, and the magical energy formed a net to tightly bind it.

The spiritual disaster struggled intensely inside the magic bindings, giving off an even more intense miasma. However, the magic bindings set down by the old instructor never broke, succeeding in stopping the spiritual disaster from expanding.

The old instructor cast a sharp gaze at the students who had retreated outside the barrier.

"Momoe! Quickly contact the Exorcist Bureau Emergency Response Center! Also - Harutora, you're responsible for contacting the Onmyou Academy. Explain the situation to them clearly and ask for assistance!"

"Okay, got it!"

"Onmyou Academy..... Who do I contact?" Since things were so sudden, Harutora asked back in a panic next to Tenma who was hurriedly taking out his phone.

Hesitation momentarily flashed over the old instructor's face. "...Ohtomo-kun might have already returned to the academy building, so if he's there....." Before he had finished speaking, a student suddenly screamed. What was surprising was that the shrilly-screaming student was Kyouko. She managed to maintain the barrier while crying out: "Touji! Get a hold of yourself!"

Touji, in the barrier group, was kneeling on the ground next to Kyouko. His face was pale, his shoulders shook intensely, and his right hand was pressed to his temple

while his left hand was clutching the ground, as if he were using all his strength to contain something. A bestial growl leaked from his clenched jaw.

"Touji!"

Harutora's eyes widened in surprise and he rushed towards Touji. Tenma frantically shouted out: " Harutora-kun, the phone!" but it didn't reach his ears. On the other hand, the teacher inside the barrier barked a warning: "Kurahashi, focus!" The normally calm Kyouko had now become flustered, and she affected the other students one after another, so the barrier gradually lost its balance.

Just then, Harutora hastily reached the kneeling Touji's side.

"Touji! You couldn't be--!"

"......Don't touch me." Touji spoke in a low voice towards the shocked Harutora. "......I'm still holding on..... but I don't have much strength left..... Don't touch me....."

Touji's voice was heavy with pain, but he didn't seem panicked. Even in an emergency situation, he was calm as always.

But even so, he couldn't relax. Harutora couldn't do anything to support Touji, so he could only anxiously bit his lip by the side.

Just then - "H-Harutora-sama!" Kon cried out, guarding Harutora's front.

Not long after, the spiritual disaster spewed out a strong miasma and the students screamed one after another. "Ugh!" Touji's body also spasmed intensely.

At the same time, the barrier finally could no longer be supported, and the miasma poured into the entire plaza.

"Kuh!"

The old instructor and the other teacher were still mustering their entire strength to bind the spiritual disaster, and the teacher responsible for maintaining the barrier gave up on setting the barrier back up, hastily

moving forward to assist the two. The spiritual disaster was still inside the bindings, but its spiritual pressure increased again.

Cracks continuously appeared on the tiles, and then with a crackling sound, pressure shattered the tiles from below, exposing a blackish-green ground with soil bubbling forth like lava. Strictly speaking, the spiritual disaster had already risen to phase two.

"Damn it!" Harutora cursed with an ashen face.

Just then--

"Come out, Hokuto!"

A stern voice sounded, and then an expanding aura burst forth in the sunset-dyed sky.

The aura shot through the sky, momentarily taking shape and forming a ten-meter long body. Two horns stood proudly on its head, its mane swaying with the wind, and the golden scales covering its body gave off a dazzling radiance under the light of the sunset. Not just the students, even the teachers looked up with bated breath.

A dragon.

Natsume's shikigami, Hokuto. Its figure was incredibly majestic, grand, and imposing, even stately, making the original threat of the spiritual disaster seem momentarily minor.

"Hokuto! I order you to purify the foul, evil influence!"

Natsume issued an order, and Hokuto quickly showed an unwilling appearance, seeming like it still wanted to enjoy its return to the vast horizon. But, when it noticed the spiritual disaster raging on the ground, it first looked surprised, and then turned its nose up in annoyance as if feeling quite displeased that the quiet evening had been polluted.

It twisted its body, turning in the air, targeting the spiritual disaster on the ground. Though it was her own order, Natsume couldn't help but go pale in fright when she saw this.

"Everyone, move back!" Natsume cried out, and Hokuto charged straight at the spiritual disaster like a hawk swooping towards its prey - or like an arrow shooting from the sky.

"Th, That's not good!"

The old instructor hurriedly released the Unmoving Golden Chains, modifying it to expand a simple barrier - though it was more like he'd thrown it out expeditiously - to the surroundings to protect the students.

Right after, the fierce and imposing Hokuto collided head-on with the spiritual disaster.

The aura and miasma clashed and the impact spread in all directions like a bomb blast. The students were knocked over or fell to the ground. Kon, whose attention was entirely placed on Hokuto, cried out, her entire body tumbling backwards after being hit by the impact and knocking into Harutora.

The aura and miasma swirled into an eddy inside the plaza. Not long after, the dust became thinner and thinner, gradually dissipating. Looking carefully, a big hole had been carved out in the original location of the spiritual disaster, revealing a state similar to after a bombing.

Hokuto once again flew into the air several meters above the ground, overlooking the situation on the ground like it was searching for whether there were any

unpleasant remnants of miasma. Each and every student's face was dazed, and they raised their heads to look up at Hokuto. As they had maintained the barrier as much as they could until the last moment and hence faced the impact of the aura storm head-on, Kyouko and the others showed a soulless appearance.

".....As expected of the Tsuchimikado family guardian beast..... It's astounding." The old instructor spoke blankly, uttering the feelings of everyone present. The simple barrier he had hastily spread out had long since been blown away.

"S, Sorry! Is everyone unharmed?"

Natsume who had summoned Hokuto ran towards the students with a red face. "Natsume....." Harutora's face was full of helplessness, clutching the dizzy Kon in his chest.

"We were saved because of you..... But could you be a little more cautious?"

"I, I had no choice, it was an emergency!"

"The moment just now was the real emergency."

"Aren't you just nitpicking! I was also very nervous."

"......Natsume-kun..... you were pretty cool up to the moment you said that 'come out, Hokuto'....."

"Even Tenma's criticizing me! L, Let me tell you, if I just stood around and did nothing, the situation would definitely have gotten out of hand! Right, sensei?"

"Hmm? Oh, uh..... probably....."

"Sensei, why are you stammering? S, Strange, was my judgment so mistaken?"

Natsume desperately defended herself, and the satisfied Hokuto turned its body above her head in elation. Not knowing how to respond, each and every student stood still - or sat on the ground.

Though all of them had heard rumors, this was their first time actually seeing the Tsuchimikado servant shikigami and the power of the shikigami that the genius Tsuchimikado Natsume controlled. This moment, they finally understood why the teachers had decided not to let Natsume participate in the exam.

But-- "......Hey." Touji moaned, and Harutora hurriedly shifted his attention.

After the spiritual disaster was purified, his good friend had still stayed kneeling on the ground like before. He had even widened his eyes and clenched his teeth, so the situation looked even more urgent than before.

"Everyone leave this place, right now.....!" Touji raised his voice to yell, his voice sounding like he was fighting back intense pain. Then, a shadow flitted across his feet.

Above his head--

Hokuto's entire body went taut and its lackadaisical demeanor changed in a flash. Kon's eyes widened from within Harutora's arms.

The teachers, Natsume, Harutora, Kyouko, and of course all of the students as well were unable to instantly recognize exactly what the 'thing' in front of them was.

That giant thing descended from the sky like a flying elephant. Even with all four limbs on the ground, it was more than three meters high, and it had a head, body, four limbs, and a tail. The first impression it gave off was

that the balance of its entire body was 'out of tune', with its head 'like' a monkey's, its limbs 'feeling somewhat like ' a tiger's, and its tail 'looking like' a snake. The impression each part of it gave off changed as time passed. No, it wasn't just an impression. The thing itself was actually constantly changing its appearance.

"......Huh?" An unknown one of the students called out stupidly, but the old instructor's face was dumbfounded.

"A, A phase three..... How is this possible....."

'For such an absurd thing to happen' - Just as he wanted to finish saying this, that 'thing' slowly raised its body, standing up on its two hind legs.

The thing extended its body, seeming to grow several times taller in a breath, and then crashed back down like it wanted to flatten something. Then, its mouth seemed to split wide open and it let out a shrill roar.

"EIIEEEE!"

The sound was ear-piercing, and miasma spewed out from it in all directions at a far greater concentration than before.

Miasma flowed like sweat across every cell of the body , across every single nerve, freezing the soul in bursts, terror and despair taking hold of the emotions. Half of the students who took this direct attack fainted where they were, and Harutora also almost lost consciousness because the force of the impact was too violent.

".....Ugh.....Uh....."

He moaned painfully, his entire body rigid, but his gaze never left that 'thing'.

It looked like an animal, but it didn't look like any animal in particular, with its body covered everywhere with hair and scales. The lengths of its limbs were also different, and its stripes meandered across its body like living creatures, its horns and wings drooping down as soon as they grew out. It simply looked like various creatures had just been mixed together - no, they were still in the process of merging.

As a result of the existence of the five elements - wood, fire, earth, metal, and water - the five yin energies that had become miasma were still clashing with each other on the inside after materializing, not giving in to one another.

A phase three spiritual disaster, Type-Chimera, referred to as a 'Nue' by Onmyouji.

"Tch! ...Order!"

The old instructor flung out a charm.

He threw a fire-element charm, and the charm hit the Nue directly in the face, igniting into a red flame. The Nue shrieked shrilly, but it wasn't wounded, just purely angry. Of course, the old instructor hadn't expected this little charm to be able to defeat the Nue. He had done this to buy time.

"I'll be the decoy! You help the students evacuate!" The old instructor commanded the other two teachers with a fiery tone.

"But--!"

"Don't be stupid! None of us will escape if we drag on like this!"

The old instructor spoke as he threw charms, guiding the Nue's attention to himself. The Nue seemed to stamp

its feet while twisting its body, continuously treading on the ground. With every movement, it scattered miasma into the surroundings.

The two teachers followed orders and guided the students to shelter with pale faces. The students who were still able to hold on to their consciousness carried the unconscious students, desperately escaping from the Nue.

Harutora also came to his senses, shouting out: "N, Natsume!"

"I know! ...Hokuto!"

Natsume ordered Hokuto to attack the Nue, and Harutora took advantage of this time to confirm the conditions of the other students.

Tenma had already moved rather far from the Nue, and though he breathed in gasps, he still managed to evacuate himself. Even though Kyouko was staggering, her expression was still perseverant. She summoned her two defensive shikigami, ordering Hakuou and Kokfuu to carry those students who couldn't walk on their own.

He couldn't find a student who had lost consciousness and who wasn't being cared for by others, so all that was left was...

"Touji, sorry for touching your body. Kon, help me lift that arm!"

"......Haru......tora....."

Touji seemed to have difficulty even speaking, and his limbs spasmed more and more severely as if there were short bursts of electricity passing through his body. Moreover, his entire body was hot like a scorched rock. Even Harutora who had prepared himself before touching him inadvertently withdrew his hand. Even the breath he exhaled from his mouth was hot enough to be mistaken for steam.

One of the strangest things was that aura was flowing from Touji's body, an aura that was clearly different from the aura that could normally be felt from him.

This was all the effect from the spiritual disaster - the Nue.

But of course, this had nothing to do with the effects of the yin energy. Instead, it was resonance. He was resonating with the Nue in front of him.

"Let me go..... I'm already..... no longer normal....."

"Don't say such stupid things! ...Kon! Hurry up!"

Harutora knelt next to Touji's body, roughly making his hand wrap around his own shoulder, which felt like he was wrapping a container filled with hot water around his neck. Though it was hot, Harutora felt chills upon contact, and the aura from his body - his spiritual body - couldn't help but tremble like it had taken a fierce blow.

"......Kuh!" Harutora grunted, stubbornly pulling Touji up.

But-- "......Harutora-sama." Kon called out lightly. Even if she had received Harutora's order, not only did she not listen to her master's instruction, she didn't even stop staring intently at the Nue, her ears sticking straight up.

"It..... It's retreating, it seems to fear something."

"Wha, What did you say?"

Kon's sudden words made Harutora forget the situation around him for a moment in confusion.

But, Kon wasn't the only person who noticed this situation. The old instructor who was fighting with the Nue and who had resolved to die, along with Natsume who was trying to fight with Hokuto, successively noticed its strange state.

The Nue's reaction was slow, and it didn't try to counterattack no matter how the old instructor attacked it. In addition, Hokuto was attracted by something other than the Nue, sluggish to pay attention to Natsume's orders.

The Nue was alert, taking a cautious stance, and at the same time screeching "EIEE", its roar mixed with anger and cowardice. However, Hokuto wasn't the opponent who made the Nue fear deeply or who made its wariness surge, and of course it wasn't the old instructor or Natsume.

"......What's this!"

Engineer boots stepped heavily on the tile-paved road.

The man's tone was casual and he didn't raise his voice , but for some reason, everyone present heard the words he spoke clearly even amidst all the noise.

"What's this group of brats doing around my prey? And there's even a true dragon coming out to mix things up, what's going on with this?" The man's tone was mocking and clearly arrogant.

A young man showed up in front of everyone with a head of cropped short silver hair, an 'X' scarred onto his forehead, and wearing silvered sunglasses on his face. Both his hands were stuck into the pockets of his fur-collared jacket, showing a lazy appearance - but he looked disdainfully and self-confidently around the spiritual disaster area. Because of the man's appearance, the area that had originally been chaotic to the limits rapidly froze instead, calming down momentarily.

The students who were still conscious all gasped. It was needless to say about those students who knew the man, but even the students who didn't recognize him gaped in surprise after witnessing his strong, savage aura .

"O, Ogre Eater....."

The man frowned as if he had heard the old instructor's sudden murmur, taking his right hand out from his jacket and raising his ring-wearing finger to point towards the old instructor.

"Hey, old man, don't call me by that name. My name is Kagami Reiji. Careful that I don't murder you if you dare mess around in front of one of the Twelve Divine Generals."

".....Damn! How could this happen.....!"

Mutobe Chihiro, who had chased after the Nue and the Independent Exorcist Kagami Reiji, noticed the figure of Tsuchimikado Natsume among the stunned, unmoving Onmyou Academy students and inadvertently gritted his teeth.

He had prepared four Nue in total, placing them separately in Ueno, Akihabara, Shinagawa, and Shibuya, which were Tokyo's Demon Gates and Rear Demon Gates, where the spiritual flow would let these four Nue awaken simultaneously. These spiritual disasters would grow simultaneously and at a rapid, astounding speed by consuming the aura in the spiritual flow. Then, he would enter the next stage of the plan.

He didn't have wild wishes that these Nue would all live on. In general, the Exorcist Bureau's abilities were outstanding, and sacrificing one or two Nue for someone even more incredible like an Independent Exorcist of the Twelve Divine Generals was within his expectations.

However, Kagami Reiji's actions were far faster than his predictions. He had originally been wary of the Meguro branch taking action, and hadn't expected Kagami to arrive first from Shinjuku in the opposite direction. It seemed that this wasn't a formal action, and he could only feel unfortunate about this kind of sudden situation.

No one could match Kagami in tracking mobile spiritual disasters, and even among the Twelve Divine

Generals, there wasn't a single one who could match his unique intuition and senses. But he was often troublesome, with a lack of responsibility for his work. Mutobe had originally believed that if he was lucky Kagami would be excluded from the fighting force, and it seemed that his thinking had become too naive as a result.

Moreover, Tsuchimikado Natsume - the youngster rumored to be the North Star King - was also here.

No, not just that, he had just now finally thought of who that slender, bandanna-wearing youngster he had seen yesterday had been. He was indeed a victim who had been pulled into the spiritual disaster two years ago, and he was clearly resonating with the Nue before him. There was only one explanation for a Nue to be resonating with a spiritual disaster victim, and such a situation hadn't been within his expectations at all. No, it was impossible to expect that there would be such a situation. 'Fate' was truly such a mischievous thing.

"What should be done....."

Enchanted heavily with stealth, Mutobe asked himself while getting as close as he could while making sure to keep a safe distance.

Should he risk intervening or watch quietly for changes? He definitely couldn't beat Kagami Reiji if he fought face-to-face.

"....."

Mutobe pinched his lips together, slowly raising his magical energy.

Part 3

...O, Ogre Eater?

This man who had suddenly come out - Kagami - stole away all of Harutora's attention.

He didn't need to look at his aura. He pretty much knew what kind of person this man was just from the presence he gave off from his entire body. Other than the feeling that he definitely wouldn't want to approach him,

he also had some kind of inexplicably fascinating traits, like a brightly colored venomous snake or the beautiful, wild, and dangerous charm of a carnivorous animal.

...And this person was also..... a Divine General?

Harutora stood stock-still, his hair standing on end. The Nue backed away with a growl, and its spiritual pressure continued to increase, a sharp light casting from its eyes.

It was entering a battle state.

"I, Independent Officer! We're from the Onmyou Academy and were attacked by a phase three spiritual disaster during a practical exam! Please provide emergency assistance!"

The old instructor shouted, his face urgent. Kagami casually made a "Ah?" upon hearing.

"What 'assistance' are you talking about, old man. Didn't I just say that this thing was my prey? You group of obstacles better get out of the way." Upon saying this, Kagami stuck his hands back in his pockets, fearlessly

heading towards the scene of the spiritual disaster and directly walking over to the Nue that was taking a threatening fighting stance.

"Idi--[37]! Don't provoke it!"

The old lecturer paled in surprise. The situation was just as he expected. The Nue hadn't showed any intention of counterattacking even after being hit by the fire-element charm attack, but it showed quite an agitated reaction when Kagami approached.

The Nue made a strange sound, twisting its giant body . That cry was different from the roar from before, and it clearly carried an 'offensive' flavor. Some of the students who had still been able to resist the miasma's assault up to now fainted and some of them took mental blows, with some vomiting where they were, and some collapsing while foaming at the mouth.

Harutora glimpsed Tenma faint to the ground out of the corner of his eyes, and of course he himself also suffered effects. "Ugh!" He grunted, his entire body dripping with sweat, but Touji was the one who showed the most obvious reaction. The arm he hung on Harutora's shoulder spasmed, and the other hand

grabbed on to the bandanna on his forehead. Seeing that Harutora and Touji were almost both collapsing, Kon hurriedly supported them from below.

However, Kagami still walked forward without stopping, even among the screams that were let out one after another. He faced the strangely shrieking Nue head-on, his steps proper and orderly.

"You're noisy, shut up." He cursed.

But even though it was muttered, it pierced through the hearts of the spectators. The Nue stopped shrieking. No, it had been forced to stop shrieking. Kagami's words carried a strong and elaborate magic energy.

"Huh?" Harutora's eyes widened in surprise, and he heard Natsume utter breathlessly: "That's first-class spirit language[38]."

"S, Spirit language?"

"It's a magic belonging to Imperial Onmyoudou - his words have coercive power that can be used to affect the opponent's mind. But never mind a human opponent, to think even a spiritual disaster--?"

Natsume helplessly raised her head to look at Hokuto to try to give orders, but she wasn't able to decide what order to give for a while. The dragon still loitered in the sky, watching the situation unfold in befuddlement.

The Nue whose voice had been sealed charged forward in a breath, twisting its giant body like the free movement of a wild beast. It showed fierce fangs, attacking Kagami with a churning anger and hatred. Harutora couldn't move a muscle, awed by its astonishing boldness, but Kagami just opened his mouth, showing a derisive smile.

"...ह्..."

Seed syllable.[39] That was a mantra representing the Kundali Vidyaraja[40] who eliminated foreign enemies. Kagami's will and magical energy used this seed syllable mantra, which was just a short word, to attack the giant figure. The Nue's entire body spasmed as if it had accidentally touched a high-voltage power line, its body showing intense 'lag' reactions, and it writhed on the ground, unable to bear the pain. The impact had released the spirit language bindings, but what came from its mouth were no longer angry roars, but rather tormented wails.

It suddenly leaped upwards, its giant body suspended in midair. Then, it ascended in midair, continuing to leap up high.

The Nue descended, sitting down on the wall of the high-rise office building towering behind them. The glass windows shattered, shards of glass falling to the ground one after another. The spiritual disaster had only been able to do such a gravity-defying action because its material had 'ambiguous' properties.

Hesitation flashed over the face of Hokuto who was staying in the same sky, not knowing whether to chase it. In the end, it decided to turn around and keep a distance. That response wasn't to defend against the Nue, but instead because Hokuto had judged that it had to be cautious of Kagami.

"Hey, I didn't get to prepare today, so don't waste too much of my time." Kagami spoke lazily, raising his head to look at the Nue, his hands still stuck in his pockets.

"...Namah sarva tatha gatebhyah sarva..."[41]

In a single breath, Kagami chanted a long incantation with a unique cadence. Vajrapani's[42] most fundamental

original dharani[43] - the Fire Realm magic, one of the Acala[44] system of worship's main suppression methods.

An incredible strong magical energy swirled into a spiral centered at Kagami, like a true tornado. An aura of fire immediately formed suppression magic, rising upwards like a gas. The Nue kicked off the wall to try to dodge, but the Fire Realm magic still chased after it, capturing it effortlessly.

Once the Fire Realm magic captured the Nue, the spiritual disaster immediately ignited into a malicious flame. The Nue became a ball of fire, wailing shrilly, and falling straight down to the ground.

Right underneath... was Kyouko, helping to evacuate the other students.

"Kyouko!"

Harutora shouted. Kyouko's face paled in surprise, quickly ordering to her two defensive shikigami. Hakuou gave the student in its hands to Kokfuu, tumbling away from underneath the Nue with its master in its arms.

Then, the Nue fell, causing the ground to shake. 'Lag' appeared in the Nue's giant body, and the Fire Realm magic's fire aura spread everywhere.

"Kurahashi! ...I, Independent Officer! Please consider the safety of the others!" The old instructor roared angrily, his face pale.

"Kurahashi~?" Kagami didn't heed the old instructor's protest, instead showing interest towards Kyouko's family name.

"Kurahashi's that - Ah, right! Onmyou Academy. In that case, that little girl's the Chief's daughter, huh? ..... Hold on, that also means that the dragon's - it's the Tsuchimikado dragon, right?"

The tone Kagami spoke with was like he had noticed a new toy. The Nue that had fallen to the ground and was dying in front of him wasn't in his sights at all.

As if he had only just now seen the students - "So there's a Tsuchimikado successor here, a brat who's rumored to be and may or may not be Yakou's reincarnation, huh?" He sized up the students present as he said this.

...Tch.

Not good. Almost by instinct, Harutora felt from the bottom of his heart that things weren't good.

There weren't many people present who could stand straight, and more importantly it was impossible for a Divine General to not see who had a link of spiritual power with the servant shikigami Hokuto.

The gaze from underneath the sunglasses focused on Natsume. Natsume took half a step back, and Harutora felt like a chunk of ice had slipped into the bottom of his stomach.

".....So you're the brat."

Kagami licked his lips like a cannibal, murmuring as he stared at Natsume. Then, he walked towards Natsume .

"Kagami! Don't touch the students!"

The old instructor's face paled, and the other two teachers hastily ran forward, planning on putting themselves between Natsume and Kagami.

"Don't move." Kagami used spirit language without even turning his head, and they immediately froze petrified to the ground, unmoving as if they had been bound. Natsume had nowhere to run and could only gaze wide-eyed at the Divine General approaching step by step.

"D, Damn--!"

Due to Touji on his back, Harutora couldn't rush to Natsume's side. It was best not to act rashly, especially since the Nue hadn't been completely purified.

"......Ha, it looks like you really are a well-raised brat. It's you, right? Tsuchimikado?" Kagami stood in front of Natsume, happily smiling while looking down at her.

The flickering Fire Realm magic showed almost no signs of extinguishing, and the Nue still burned in the flame. The flame burning with magical energy illuminated Kagami's sunglasses from the side, reflecting the fire's sparkling light.

Natsume managed to face Kagami's gaze head-on.

".....Th, That's me."

"What's your name?"

"T, Tsuchimikado Natsume."

"Tch..... What are you scared of, I won't eat you - I heard that you made that goth loli Dairenji cry? At any rate, that little girl's one of the Twelve Divine Generals. Since you won against her, you can stand tall and proud. That way's more suited to my preferences."

Kagami smiled even more savagely as he said this.

"After all - only a self-confident brat makes others feel ' drive', you understand? Like how an idiot who thinks of himself as smart is more interesting and how it's more meaningful to trample on a small fry who thinks himself

powerful. Plus, you're the descendant of a famous family , which really makes people eager to test you."

"....."

Natsume stared at Kagami, pressing her lips together wordlessly. Kagami noticed Natsume's reaction, letting out a low snicker.

Just then, the Nue shrieked with a sharp "EE--!", leaping up.

An attack. The Nue had taken advantage of Kagami's defenseless moment, attacking Kagami by surprise from the shroud of flames. As a spiritual disaster, the miasma on the Nue's body was still quite powerful. "Natsume!" Harutora's body inadvertently went rigid.

However, Kagami was unmoved. He hmphed in annoyance, taking one hand out of his jacket.

He slashed his fingers horizontally from left to right like he was trying to tear apart the air, and then used the four fingers from his forefinger to his pinky finger to draw four vertical lines from up to down. An intense, dazzling light burst forth from the grid Kagami drew in midair as the wall's magical energy rose in a flash, not

only stopping the Nue's continued advance, but even repulsing it back.

He hadn't chanted an incantation or formed a hand seal. His magic was extremely simple, but his power was frighteningly strong. In comparison, the haya-kuji that Harutora had drawn was simply worthless.

...T, Too strong.....

Harutora couldn't help but look stupidly. Even if a phase three spiritual disaster was an enemy that an entire team of exorcists would have trouble confronting, Kagami was playing with it in the palm of his hand.

After witnessing Dairenji Suzuka's strength, he had been quite clear on how powerful the Twelve Divine Generals were, but Kagami's strength was a level higher. No, just like he himself had said, Suzuka was just a child, and she was just a simple researcher compared to Kagami who had been appointed an Independent Exorcist. The difference in strength of the two was like the one between an adult and a child.

"Damn annoying..... If I don't deal with this thing first, that group of people heading to Shinagawa will rush over here." Kagami murmured impatiently and was just

about to fight the Nue again, but-- "Wait, I thought of a good idea." A crooked smile emerged on his face again and his gaze moved upwards. He looked at Hokuto in the air and snickered.

"You're called Natsume, right? Why don't you have that dragon purify the spiritual disaster."

"......What?"

"What, the spiritual disaster's power has been weakened quite a bit. This kind of small fry Nue is nothing to be scared about, especially since you've got that genuine dragon."

Kagami spoke with a grin and Natsume's expression looked even more rigid as she listened.

Kagami spoke correctly, the servant shikigami Hokuto was 'materialized aura', the same kind of being as this phase three spiritual disaster Nue - namely, a ' materialized spiritual disaster'. Hence, Hokuto and the Nue's original strengths were comparable - No, considering Hokuto's 'level', Hokuto was actually far stronger than the Nue.

But Hokuto was a shikigami, not a spiritual disaster. As a shikigami, it was strongly affected by its master - Natsume. Though Natsume was an excellent student called a genius, in the end she was just a 'student with especially outstanding grades', not a 'specialized Onmyouji'. Not only was the current her unable to wield Hokuto's true power, using Hokuto at will was also a problem.

Needless to say, Kagami was naturally provoking Natsume because he had seen through this. In his eyes, not only Natsume, but also the Nue, the teachers, the students, and a phase three spiritual disaster here were all clearly insignificant in his eyes.

Natsume gritted her teeth, staring straight into Kagami's eyes, hidden behind the sunglasses he wore.

".....A, Are you even qualified to be an exorcist?"

"What did you say?"

"Only a lunatic would treat a spiritual disaster like a game! This is a phase three spiritual disaster! Why don't you properly purify it first before playing around!"

Natsume denounced Kagami to his face, and the sneering smile on Kagami's face faded.

"......Ho." He hummed then grabbed Natsume, who was unable to respond in time, by the collar. Kagami's movement was keen like a skilled martial artist, because he had long since trained to be skilled at surprise attacks.

"This gifted student here is really speaking well. Hey, Natsume-san? Why don't you brace yourself and let us see how the gifted student of a famous family carries out justice - alright?" He spoke to the stunned and pale Natsume, a savage smile emerging on his mouth as he drew near Natsume's face in a flash. Natsume reached out her hands to shake off Kagami, but Kagami was as immovable as a mountain.

"Hahaha..... Not bad, not bad at all. Your 'value' is really worth a try."

Aura flowed along Kagami's body, giving off a dangerous air. The immobile teachers could only grit their teeth and glare angrily at Kagami.

Just then--

"Let Natsume go, you cross-marked bastard!"

This angry outburst didn't make its target tremble in fright, but it did for everyone on the sidelines who heard those words.

Kagami's gaze shot out like an arrow, and Harutora welcomed the Divine General's gaze.

"I, Idiot.....!"

Natsume hurriedly scolded Harutora, but not just Harutora, even Kagami turned a deaf ear to her words.

The smile on Kagami's face vanished again.

".....Where'd this brat come from?"

".....I'm Tsuchimikado Harutora, the son of the Tsuchimikado branch family!" Harutora replied in an angry roar while supporting Touji. Actually, he was scared to death inside, but his intense anger won out over his terror, forcing him to come forward.

...What kind of joke is this bastard playing at!

Regardless of who the opponent was or how large the gap in strength between them was, he definitely wouldn't back down quietly when he should be angry.

This sudden action stunned the teachers for a moment, and Kyouko who had finally stood up also gaped in shock. Kon was the only exception. "H, Harutora-sama!" She cast a reverent gaze towards Harutora, her face flushed in excitement.

Kagami tilted his head, saying: "The branch family child, ah~", still not releasing the hands grabbing Natsume's collar. He continued to size up Harutora, then suddenly frowned, ignoring Harutora, releasing Natsume, and abruptly leaping backwards.

Right after, a thick band of light swooped down from above in the space opened up between Kagami and Natsume.

A dragon rapidly rushed down.

"Hokuto!"

Hokuto threatened Kagami like it was protecting the frightened Natsume. Even though it was willful, did as it

pleased, and didn't listen to its master's orders, Hokuto was still Natsume's servant shikigami, and not a single shikigami in the world would forgive a person trying to harm its master.

"......Ha!" Kagami continued jumping backwards, crouching on the ground and laughing happily.

He stared at the dragon lingering in midair in front of Natsume - "Very nice, this is much more of a challenge than that useless Nue..... Alright, let me teach you group of unworldly brats how harsh the world of adults is."

He let out a low laugh, slowly standing up. With that, not only Harutora, but also even Natsume couldn't avoid a fight. Harutora, Natsume, Kon, and Hokuto took their own fighting stances, entering a state of battle readiness.

An explosive situation.

Just then, something strange happened as if to stop them from exploding into conflict.

Of course, Kagami was the first person to notice the anomaly.

"...What's going on?" His expression changed - and the ground bubbled up instantly.

"This is - spirit flow?"

Even Kagami had difficulty concealing his panic.

The ground spewed out aura, scattering the magical chains on the teachers' bodies. Natsume and Kyouko couldn't help but scream, their feet unsteady. It was a similar situation to a geyser eruption - or a giant water pipe bursting underground. Among those, the latter was closest to the real situation.

...Could it be that someone was secretly manipulating the spirit flow?

Though Kagami was a First-Class Onmyouji, he couldn't easily control spirit flow with magic. "Who's

doing this!" He asked angrily, and of course he got no reply.

Then, as if to push aside Kagami's question, the Nue roared angrily.

The Nue's body continued to swell, absorbing - ' devouring' - the aura that was spewing out, recovering the wounds Kagami had created in moments. He had ignored the regular order of spiritual disaster purification - he hadn't sealed the spiritual disaster inside a barrier, so as a result it had brought unexpectedly big trouble.

"Tch." Kagami clicked his tongue, immediately forming several seals with both hands naturally and smoothly.

He had come directly to the scene of the spiritual disaster after leaving the branch office, so never mind pre-prepared magical tools, he didn't even have a single charm with him. If he let the Nue escape from this place right now, the situation might become even thornier.

"...!" Just then, as expected of a battle-hardened person, Kagami rapidly noticed an attack, making the prompt decision to abandon his magic binding of the Nue and

focusing his magical energy into his blade seal instead, bringing down the charm that came flying at him - a charm that had been thrown after invisibility magic had been cast upon it.

The magical energy contained inside the charm exploded, blotting out Kagami's vision, and the Nue took advantage of the opportunity to leap up powerfully.

It escaped the scene with all its might, not wasting a moment of time. The upsurge of spiritual pressure released the Fire Realm magic wrapping around its body, and embers scattered in the sky. Kagami clicked his tongue, but he didn't have the spare energy to immediately capture the Nue because he had to deal with the unknown attacker's pursuit. The opponent had chosen this moment to attack, so it was clear that he was the same person who had messed with the spirit flow. Judging by that, this person definitely wasn't a pushover.

Moreover--

"Aaaaaahh!"

There was another spiritual disaster.

The distance was extremely close, and Kagami raised his spiritual pressure, reflexively strengthening his spiritual defense. Things would be troublesome it they got any worse. He locked on to the new spiritual disaster, planning on 'crushing' the distorted aura in a breath.

But, once he saw the source of the spiritual disaster, his movements immediately stopped.

"The hell's this."

Kagami doubted whether he was seeing wrongly, but the spiritual disaster was indeed coming from the one who had just condemned him as the 'cross-marked bastard', that Tsuchimikado brat--

--No.

It wasn't him. The spiritual disaster was unrelated to the branch family brat, but rather it was next to him. The other person that the branch family brat - the one called Harutora - was supporting was the source of the spiritual disaster. That person had exhausted his strength roaring out loud amidst the aura erupted by the spirit flow. Harutora desperately tried to keep him under control, but he seemed like he could no longer hold himself back,

knocking aside Harutora's hand and wrapping his arms around himself, his forehead smashing violently onto the ground.

"......That brat....." Kagami's gaze stared intently at him .

Finally, the brat kneeling on the ground and moaning painfully passed out, collapsing directly on the ground. Harutora's face paled, calling out: "Touji!" and reaching his hand out to support his shoulder. Natsume was speechless from shock, and Kyouko stood still blankly. Even the teachers were dumbstruck and perplexed.

The eruption of the spirit flow gradually stabilized. The Nue had long since left - it had escaped the scene.

But the second spiritual disaster was still right by that brat's body, and it wasn't just a simple spiritual disaster. A mobile spiritual disaster. No, more accurately, the two weren't similar at all.

"......Ha! This is too interesting....."

Kagami momentarily forgot about the person who had attacked him, a fierce smile emerging on his face.

His mouth curved into a crescent - the 'Ogre Eater' Kagami Reiji smiled.

"That brat's been possessed by something, right? ...No, it's none other than an 'oni'. To think I would encounter a living spirit here..... Haha! Not bad, you group of brats are really interesting!"

Chapter 3 - Living Spirit

Part 1

"Touji!"

Harutora's face paled and he hastily reached out to the side to support Touji's shoulder. Once he touched Touji, a chill accompanied by pain coursed through his body as if he had touched ice-cold subzero air. Only then did he realize that this was his first time seeing Touji fall into this kind of state with his own eyes ever since he had gained his spirit-seeing ability.

"H-H, Harutora-sama! T-Touji-dono is...?"

Kon, Natsume, Kyouko, and the three teachers who didn't understand the circumstances all didn't understand what exactly had happened to Touji. Harutora couldn't add an explanation either, only able to bite his lip in silence.

Just then-- "......Ha! This is really too interesting....." Kagami spoke, and Harutora's anxiety abruptly increased a bit.

"That brat's been possessed by something, right? ...No, it's none other than an 'oni'. To think I would encounter a living spirit here..... Haha! Not bad, you group of brats are really interesting!"

"Tch.....!"

Harutora ground his teeth, but he was helpless. Touji had long since lost consciousness with a dark expression.

Examples of spirits 'materializing' using some object as a vessel weren't rare. Objects exposed to large amounts of aura for a long time, especially those affected by aura with specific natures, would often be used by a spirit as a vessel when it materialized. Actually, among the spiritual beings that Onmyouji used, many were magical tools used for many years that had become vessels and formed shikigami. They would be materialized from ' ambiguous and volatile spirits' by using objects of 'solid existence' as catalysts.

Spiritual disasters had similar principles.

When spiritual disasters entered phase three - when they 'materialized' - they would absorb or 'possess' objects, obtaining a vessel. Though the growth and

development of phase three spiritual disasters would slow down because of this, it would show a tendency towards long-term stabilization. In addition, even though the aura could be corrected, to entirely disperse the distortion or complete purification would be almost impossible.

"You're just like Dairenji."

Kagami spoke, gazing intently at Touji.

"In the spiritual disaster attack two years ago, that old man turned into a demon using himself as a vessel, leading to a spiritual disaster. Hahaha..... I feel it, I feel a dangerous air. According to what the headquarters said, the condition this time is exactly the same as back then... this is called 'fate'. And even a living spirit came out..... Hey, brat. You're called Touji, right? When did that condition start? You couldn't have been possessed by an oni two years ago, right?"

Kagami laughed confidently and walked towards the collapsed Touji, and Harutora's hair stood on end over his entire body.

".....Dairenji Shidou became a demon - and at the time, that person developed into a phase four. It wouldn't be

strange if there were people dragged into the spiritual disaster who became living spirits. How is it, Touji? Were you a victim of that spiritual disaster attack?" Kagami asked, and things were just as he expected.

...Damn.

Harutora shook, gritting his teeth.

Two years ago, Touji had been involved in a spiritual disaster terrorist attack incident, leaving after-effects. These were the after-effects that the spiritual disaster had left behind in Touji's body.

A 'living spirit' normally meant someone who had partially become a demon, but it was also used in General Onmyoudou to indicate people who had become a vessel for spirits but who still maintained their own consciousness.

Ato Touji's body had been possessed by a 'Type-Ogre' mobile spiritual disaster - or perhaps it should be described as being left behind inside him. Of the people close to him, only Principal Kurahashi, Ohtomo, and Harutora knew this fact.

"......Even so..... What does it matter!" Harutora left Touji's side, blocking Kagami's path.

"It's true that Touji's a spiritual disaster victim, but he's not a spiritual disaster! It has nothing to do with exorcists , so you should hurry up and go chase the Nue!" He roared out loud, trying to conceal his trembling voice.

"You should let a specialist decide whether an exorcist should get involved or not. An outsider like you has no place to talk." Kagami spoke with a level head.

"M, My dad is Touji's primary physician! A specialist Onmyou doctor decided that there was no problem with Touji!"

"An Onmyou doctor from the Tsuchimikado family? Things are getting more and more interesting."

Thrilled with joy, Kagami replied to Harutora's angry roar. The distance between the two was gradually shortening, and it finally reached a range where he could reach him by putting out his hand.

Once the opponent used spirit language, he was bound to be unable to move. Just as Harutora bit the

bullet and planned on preemptively taking a battle-ready stance, Kagami swung an empty fist one step faster to shift Harutora's attention, then took advantage of his openings to kick him without taking any extra trouble. The sole of his engineer boot kicked into Harutora's stomach.

"Ugh!"

Harutora's body bended and he was sent flying backwards by the kick. Natsume cried out "Harutora!" in surprise, and Kon's face went white from surprise, hurriedly dashing to her master's side.

...Th, This bastard.....!

Harutora had been careless, and he hadn't expected that Kagami was long since used to using violence, as well as magic, to resolve his problems. Come to think of it, he hadn't used magic to deal with Natsume either. Judging from the fact that he believed he didn't especially need to use magic, he was quite good at exercising violence.

"Damn.....!"

Harutora borrowed Kon's strength, struggling to stand up, when--

".....Let me see." Kagami had already knelt next to Touji. He grabbed Touji's hair, pulling his head, and then uttered the words: "This is in the way," pulling the bandanna on Touji's forehead off with a yank.

In the area, not only did Kagami gasp, but also Natsume, Kyouko, and the teachers had the same reaction. Kagami hmphed, then whistled implicationally.

"Hahaha..... What an incredible living spirit. Isn't he one step from becoming 'fallen'?"

After taking off the bandanna, a pair of two-to-three centimeter horns had sprouted from Touji's forehead, showing weak 'lag' reactions. In addition, his lips were opened, with fangs jutting out that had gradually grown from his canines.

The oni in his body and the Nue's miasma had resonated and activated. The demon transformation process had been accelerated by the oni devouring the aura spewed out by the aura flow. Currently, it wasn't aura that was spilling forth from Touji's body, but rather the demonic air that the oni gave off. The demonic air coursing through the surroundings covered Touji's body, gradually materializing.

".....Since the spirit flow stabilized, he hasn't completely become a demon. If he had just 'fallen' altogether, things would be much simpler..... But as an Independent Exorcist, I can't sit and watch the root of a spiritual disaster without minding - what should I do, hm?"

Kagami pulled up Touji's hair, letting out a wretched laugh. Harutora's vision went blank with anger and his heart jumped intensely, a searing agitation driving out the pain from his whole body.

"You..... despicable person.....!" Harutora mustered his entire body's strength, clenching his fists and standing up. Kagami glanced at him from the corner of his eyes, a scornful, derisive smile forming on his lips.

But--

"......Don't touch me, you cross-marked bastard....."

Touji grabbed out with his hand, tightly clasping the arm that Kagami had seized his hair with.

"......I don't care if you're a Divine General or whoever you are..... If you dare look down upon living spirits, careful that I don't kill you....."

He imitated Kagami's tone with a fearless smile on his face, then he clenched Kagami's arm with even more force. The demonic aura that covered his arm partially materialized as it showed 'Lag' reactions. A demon's arm - a half-translucent rigid shadow vividly emerged before everyone's eyes like a mirage.

"...Tch."

Since his strength wasn't under control, Touji exerted quite a shocking grip strength. Kagami quickly strengthened his arm with magical energy, forcefully throwing off Touji's hand, and stood up.

"Touji! You..."

Harutora's face brightened but immediately sank. After Kagami released Touji, he didn't get up, but lay supine instead, letting out pained moans. The arm that had almost materialized returned to its original state, but the horns and fangs were still the same.

".....Hu.....Wh, When someone's desperately trying to..... suppress it..... p, please don't cause trouble..... next to me, ugh.....!"

Touji couldn't catch his breath as he looked up at Kagami while lying in a '大' shape. Kagami who stood up looked callous as he gazed at the lying-down Touji.

By Kagami's judgment, the progress of Touji's demon transformation was gradually easing since the spirit flow had stabilized. But once the oni awoke, it wouldn't be easy to suppress it again, and Touji was currently fighting for his life with the oni inside him.

"Alright, stop right there! There's nothing left for you here, so get away from him!" Harutora roared angrily.

Then-- ".....What Harutora says is right, Independent Exorcist! In any case, spiritual disaster aftermaths aren't in the scope of your job, right? Please withdraw from this place immediately." Natsume spoke, and Hokuto above

her head made a low growl like a punk threatening the opponent with 'this guy still wants to fight?'. It indeed seemed to hold some deep rivalry with Kagami.

Not just Natsume, but Kyouko and the various teachers also had hard looks, wordlessly expressing that they wouldn't let Kagami do as he pleased. As for Kon, she was already prepared to defend against the opponent following up on Harutora since her master had been kicked flying. Actually, she had rapidly turned into a blade of revenge long since the moment Harutora had been kicked, and was waiting by the side, ready to go.

Harutora, Kon, Natsume, Hokuto, Kyouko, and the teachers were resolved to the death, staring at the Kagami's arrogant, lone self. Touji opened his eyes and gasped intensely by Kagami's feet.

"...Tch." Kagami clicked his tongue fiercely.

"You guys..... Come if you can." Aura spilled forth from Kagami's entire body. The wrath and strength of one of the Twelve Divine Generals brought a tense feeling far surpassing that from when they confronted

the Nue, as if it were a sharp blade. A chill ran down Harutora's back, his stomach wouldn't stop aching, and his limbs almost trembled as well.

But just then--

"Kagami! What are you doing!"

A voice suddenly came from the air. It was a caw - no, it was a high-pitched cry like a child's. Upon hearing that voice, Kagami immediately seemed like he had been doused by a bucket of cold water.

"Tch, damn." Kagami cursed.

Harutora hastily raised his head and looked up.

"Huh? A, A crow..."

...No!

At first glance, it seemed like a big crow was flapping its wings and flying above Harutora and the others' heads.

But a more careful look would notice that it actually wasn't a crow. That thing had a crow's sharp beak, a

jet-black head, and could fly with its wings, but from its head down it had what seemed like a human body and limbs. It was also wearing pitch-black miasma protection clothing, an exorcist uniform - though of a slightly smaller size.

The crow stared at Harutora, showing a fierce gaze.

"I'm not a crow! I'm a tengu[45]! A crow tengu!" That thing huffily opened its mouth especially to correct him. Actually, though it wore an exorcist outfit, that thing's appearance was exactly the same as the crow tengu of legend.

Then - "Dasai! Don't rush forward recklessly - Uwah! Dragon! It's a dragon!" Another crow tengu flew over. Harutora's eyes widened in shock and the two crow tengu circled above his head in no rush.

"Kokuryuu! Never mind the dragon! Kagami's the important one! What did Kagami do!"

"Ah, Kagami! This scoundrel 'Ogre Eater'! What did you do this time!"

"And where did the Nue go? There's a dragon here, but not a Nue!"

"Right, the Nue! Where'd the Nue go, Kagami! Did you dispose of it?"

"Ga[46]! Could it have escaped? Kagami let the Nue escape! Kagami's all talk!"

"Gaga! If Zenjirou learns of this he'll definitely scold Kagami to death! Serves you right! Serves you right!"

The two crow tengu cried out noisily without stopping , not heeding the local atmosphere at all. But because of the crow tengus' chattering cries, the original tense feeling gradually relaxed and Harutora lost all his energy all of a sudden. Natsume's anger, shock, and surprise all mixed together because things were so sudden, and she showed an odd expression.

"......Shut up." Kagami spat unhappily.

"...Kagami! Where did the Nue go? Its presence vanished, but it didn't seem like it was purified!"

A motorcycle sped into the small plaza where Harutora and the others were.

An eagle-eyed man flew forward like he was riding a steel stallion. He wore an old aviator jacket coupled with a pair of jeans whose knees were covered with holes. For some reason, he wore woven sandals on his feet. His robust physique seemed lively, and his keen expression clearly showed strictness but also masculinity - a straightforward air.

Harutora noticed that there was something strapped to the belt on the man's waist, and with one glance he instantly remembered this man's identity.

...I know him!

The man on the motorcycle wore a katana on his waist. The image of this blade's scabbard was still deeply imprinted on Harutora's mind. He had seen the live broadcast of a spiritual disaster purification on television, and it was this man before him who had cut down an ancient tree back then, easily exorcising a phase three spiritual disaster.

One of the Twelve Divine Generals.

Harutora's memories were not mistaken. Everyone present - anyone who was related to magic had probably seen this man.

The rising star of the Exorcist Bureau, Independent Exorcist Kogure Zenjirou.

"Big trouble! Big trouble, Zenjirou! This idiot Kagami let the Nue escape!"

"Shameful, shameful! Kagami is all talk!"

Kogure's shikigami - Dasai and Kokuryuu, the two crow tengu, scrambled to report to their master.

As he looked around inspecting the site of the spiritual disaster, Kogure couldn't help but furrow his brow at the strange situation before him. In particular, his gaze went even more befuddled when he noticed Hokuto, murmuring the words: "How did a dragon come out?" Then, when he noticed the collapsed Touji and 'saw' the foreign aura on his body, his face became even more confused.

"Hm." After pondering for a while, "...Kagami, what's going on?" He requested that Kagami explain the current

situation with a grim tone. Kagami turned a deaf ear to the little reports of the two crow tengu, shrugging his shoulders doubtfully.

"The Nue escaped, we won't catch it even if we chase it ."

"......You somehow didn't deal with it?"

"Someone intervened. I think it's definitely the work of the Twin-Horned Syndicate."

Kogure quickly frowned upon hearing those words. But, he didn't continue asking about that topic.

"I want to know the actual situation first. Something got in your way and you let the Nue escape. Where's the person who obstructed you?"

"Who knows, that person messed up the spirit flow and disappeared without a trace right afterwards. He seems very capable."

"......I understand. Then, what's up with that boy?"

"Wait!" Once Kogure asked, Harutora who originally hadn't even dared to breathe loudly immediately

shouted: "Touji - he's a spiritual disaster victim! He has nothing to do with the spiritual disaster just now, he just has after-effects because of the spiritual disaster two years ago, but he's receiving treatment from an Onmyou doctor who also guaranteed that there definitely wasn't any danger, so you don't need to worry! Please believe me!"

Harutora spoke frantically. Kagami scratched his silver hair in annoyance, but Kogure frowned, looking perplexed. He stared right at Harutora, looked at Touji, looked up at Hokuto above his head, and then shifted his gaze to Natsume, Kon, and the others, seeming to still not understand the current situation.

"Independent Officer Kogure! We're teachers from the Onmyou Academy and these are all Onmyou Academy students. Today we were holding a practical exam when we were attacked by a Type-Chimera spiritual disaster, but fortunately Independent Officer Kagami extended a helping hand. However, the situation is as Independent Office Kagami described. Because of the interference of a third party, the Type-Chimera has already escaped from here." The old instructor called out with a straight back.

Upon hearing the specialist's report, Kogure looked shocked.

"Could it be that you were an exorcist before?"

"Correct! In addition, the youngster named Ato Touji that was mentioned just now is an academy student, and there is no need to trouble you Independent Officers with him right now. As for how to deal with him, the Onmyou Academy will take full responsibility!"

The old instructor fought wearily and awkwardly, but he still laid down an ironclad promise. A sliver of surprise flashed across Kogure, and then he nodded his head as if he suddenly saw the light.

"The Onmyou Academy. So that's how things were, now that you mention it, it was brought up before..... So in other words this is the Tsuchimikado dragon?"

Kogure straddled the motorcycle, looking up at Hokuto with a look of sudden realization. Kokuryuu and Dasai also flapped their wings, looking at Hokuto who flew in the same sky with "Wah! Wah!" and "This dragon is the Tsuchimikado shikigami!". Hokuto tilted its head, confused and uncomprehending.

"As for the victim of the spiritual disaster two years ago..... I remember there was a kid....."

Kogure gazed at Touji with quite a grim gaze, pursing his lips. A specialist's gaze was sizing up Touji to see how big of a threat he had as a spiritual disaster. Upon seeing this, Harutora couldn't help but swallow.

But, Kogure just lightly said: "...Alright." then, he revved the motorcycle engine, saying to Kagami:

"Kagami! We're chasing the Nue together."

"What? Didn't I say we couldn't catch up? That Nue was probably manipulated by humans, and it has a bit of intelligence. More importantly, it's related to the terrorist attack, and it'll probably use stealth."

"Wait until we catch up to it to confirm those things. Get to work!"

Kogure rebutted Kagami's mutters of complaint in a breath. Kagami's face twisted from anger, clicking his tongue violently.

"...Excuse me, senseis! I'm sorry, we're going to head out to pursue the spiritual disaster. Kagami has probably caused you a lot of trouble, but due to the emergency situation, please confront the Exorcist Bureau about it later. Also, the Meguro branch has already sent out a spiritual disaster purification team headed here, and they'll be responsible for dealing with the aftermath. Do you have any other issues?" Kogure spoke.

"No, we shall comply with Independent Officer Kogure's orders!"

The old instructor saluted, and Kogure quickly returned the salute, then deftly manipulated the heavy motorcycle, turning around in place.

"Ga! Zenjirou, you're always too nice!"

"Naive! Zenjirou, you're irredeemably naive! No wonder Kagami is defiant!"

"Shut up! You guys look for the Nue, go on!"

Kogure's motorcycle sped out with a rumble, but close observation would notice that there was something off about this motorcycle's movements, as if the motorcycle ran of its own will.

Before he left, Kogure urged again: "Kagami!" Kagami muttered impatiently, taking a strange step for some reason. Finally, he stared at Harutora, who was the closest to him, through his sunglasses, saying:

"Harutora, Touji, Natsume, I'll remember the names of you brats....." Afterwards, his figure vanished.

Harutora gaped and was speechless for a while, doubting his own eyes. Kagami had vanished rapidly, like a shikigami dematerializing.

"......Far Step, moving in the aura flow..... How incredible....." Natsume spoke, the same expression as Harutora's on her face.

"M, Moving inside the aura flow..... What does that mean? Instant movement? Can humans do such a thing?"

Harutora didn't know that Far Step was one of the Imperial Onmyoudou magics, unused by General

Onmyoudou. Imperial-style integrated Far Step with the magic art of 'shukuchi[47]', an extraordinarily difficult magic. It was one of the most difficult stunts of Imperial-style that hadn't been included in banned magic .

Kagami dove into the spirit flow, and the motorcycle Kogure rode departed in the blink of an eye. Harutora, Natsume, and the others stood still. Then, as if the battle had finally ended after a year of hardship, their bodies collapsed in an instant.

"That was..... They were Divine Generals....." Harutora murmured listlessly. Then, he immediately came to his senses. "Touji! Are you alright?" He hurriedly turned to the collapsed Touji.

There was no reply. Touji had closed his eyes at some point, losing consciousness again.

The horns on his forehead were still there, but his fangs had already returned to the size of his original teeth, and his condition was gradually recovering. Harutora finally relaxed when he saw this.

The old instructor's legs were strengthless, and the other two teachers helped support him by the arms. Natsume and Kyouko stared with dignified faces at Touji whose secret had been exposed. Kon's ears twitched anxiously, only returning Kachiwari to its scabbard after confirming the surrounding situation. Hokuto swayed its long body, like it was asking: "Are things over?"

Night had fallen over the surroundings before anyone had noticed.

Five more minutes passed after the storm subsided until the exorcists Kogure had mentioned finally arrived at the scene.

Part 2

"......How could this be, Touji-kun is....." Tenma who had regained his consciousness was stunned when he heard Harutora's explanation.

"I knew the spiritual disaster left after-effects in his body..... but I didn't think it would be like this....." Tenma had a difficult time concealing his shock, since, after all, he had just experienced the fearfulness of a spiritual disaster first-hand. Moreover, Tenma wasn't the

only one like this, as Natsume and Kyouko were probably the same. Harutora lowered his head downheartedly.

Harutora and the others had returned to the Onmyou Academy building.

At the moment, the students who had been involved in the spiritual disaster were still being carried into the Onmyou Academy. They had more or less received spiritual trauma - they had developed the so-called spirit encumbrance[48] - and the teachers were currently performing treatment with all their power.

Of course, Touji was also one of the students receiving treatment.

Though his condition had stabilized, there was still a spiritual disaster residing in his body, so the Onmyou Academy had prepared a separate practical training room enchanted with a barrier for him, separating him from the other students, and specially having the teachers qualified as Onmyou doctors responsible for his treatment.

Treatment - more accurately, it was re-stabilizing the seal that Harutora's father had cast. Harutora and the others had originally stayed by Touji's side, but had been sent away after the teachers told them "Leave the rest to us to deal with", and could only move to the room Tenma was in.

"...Natsume and Kyouko as well, I'm sorry for always concealing it from everyone."

"....."

"Whatever, that kind of thing isn't so easy to talk about ....."

Natsume stayed silent after Harutora apologized, but Kyouko awkwardly replied.

Two hours before, Touji and the others had still been classmates with a decent relationship, but after he suddenly became a living spirit before their eyes, it was no wonder they wouldn't know what to do.

But it was because they were Onmyou Academy students with accurate knowledge that they didn't overreact to this unveiling. If the situation happened in

the ordinary high school that Harutora and Touji had studied at before, the others definitely wouldn't just feel ' troubled' like Natsume and the others.

Because of this, Harutora and Touji had chosen never to mention this matter when they were in high school, and they had continued taking the same attitude after they transferred to the Onmyou Academy.

"After entering here..... I finally felt like Touji and I got together with everyone." Harutora spoke tirelessly with his head lowered.

"We got along with everyone better than I thought at the start, so it became harder and harder for me to mention it..... I thought in my heart that it would be good to just stay like this..... I was scared of destroying the atmosphere that was so hard to build up....."

When he said this, the continually silent Natsume's shoulders suddenly trembled and her eyes slightly widened, like she had thought of something. But, Harutora didn't notice her reaction, and continued to speak:

"Please don't blame Touji for hiding this. He actually had no intention to hide it, but didn't say it for my sake.

He definitely saw that I was very satisfied with my current life - especially my relationship with everyone." Upon saying this, a self-deprecating smile that was pained and a bit sorrowful emerged on his face.

He thought of Touji and Hokuto, and it wasn't the dragon that emerged in his mind, but the girl - Harutora's and Touji's good friend, the shikigami with the body of a girl.

Harutora hadn't mentioned Touji's circumstances to Hokuto either, his reason being exactly the same as right now. He liked it when the three of them messed around together and didn't want that relationship to change. Because of this, he hid things from his high school classmates and didn't tell Hokuto the truth. Thinking back on things now, maybe Touji actually wanted to say it and let his good friend know about his true self, but since Harutora didn't reveal it, Touji, understanding his good friend's feelings, went along with Harutora and hid the secret in the depths of his heart.

"....."

Harutora lowered his head without a word. After a while, he suddenly looked seriously at Natsume, Kyouko , and Tenma.

"...Sorry, I apologize for always hiding it from you." Harutora spoke with a lowered head, bowing deeply in apology.

"But he..... You don't need to worry that Touji will become a danger. After encountering the spiritual disaster, he stayed for almost a year in a related treatment facility to be treated. My dad and I went several times together, and the treatment process was really hard..... At the time, he actually couldn't control himself..... He almost became an oni, but I promise that there are definitely no problems right now."

Harutora lowered his head, speaking the truth as if muttering to himself. Faced with these serious facts, the others didn't know how to respond for a while.

Then, Harutora raised his head without warning. "On the other hand, my luck is really bad." He forced a smile, trying to alleviate the present atmosphere. "Today was pretty much a disaster. My exam went terribly, I got attacked by a Nue, got involved with an extraordinarily

powerful Divine General, and Touji had problems..... and I made everyone else get involved. There's really no helping me....." He laughed casually, not like his usual smile at all. Instead, it made Kyouko and Tenma feel even worse.

He couldn't think of any other ways to remedy things. The current him was truly desperate.

"I'm really, truly sorry. I know just apologizing can't resolve any problems, and this was all my fault, so--"

"Harutora." Natsume, who had been keeping her silence, interrupted Harutora's words as if to give him a sharp warning. "As your master, I order you not to continue saying such things."

Harutora suddenly lost his words, and it wasn't just him, as Kyouko and Tenma also gazed at Natsume with bated breath. Those words had touched the heart of all the listeners present, almost a kind of spirit language... Even if it wasn't first-class magic, it could still be classified as a second-class spirit language.

Natsume shot a sharp gaze towards her own shikigami , but she smiled lightly immediately afterwards, asking back in a naive tone: "'Sorry for always hiding it from you'?"

Then, she leaned extremely naturally towards Harutora's side, whispering into his ear. "...With that, things are settled, Bakatora."

"......What?"

Not comprehending this, Harutora's face flushed. When Natsume saw this appearance, she quietly sent him a coy wink from an angle that the other two couldn't see. Then, she moved away from Harutora whose heartbeat was rapidly accelerating, turning to face Kyouko and Tenma. The pink ribbon in her jet-black hair danced lightly in the air.

"Harutora and Touji, you both think we're all idiots. It's really maddening."

"Uh, that....."

"N, Natsume-kun?"

"You agree, right?" Natsume's sudden action stunned Kyouko and Tenma, but she didn't pay any heed to that, slightly smiling at her two classmates.

"To think they would worry that our attitudes would be completely different after learning Touji was a living spirit. What kind of joke is that, aren't you treating us like complete fools? Regardless of whether he's a living spirit or a demon, Touji's Touji, isn't that natural?" Natsume declared with a smile, her tone firm and free from doubt.

"......That's right." Kyouko immediately showed an earnest gaze upon hearing that, replying happily.

"But you can't blame him, guys always get things wrong in that area. Of course, Natsume-kun's an exception, right, Tenma?"

"Huh - Oh, yeah! That's right, you two are way too mistaken!"

The conversation was passed to Tenma, and he hurriedly expressed agreement with Natsume and Kyouko's assertion. Harutora murmured a "You guys..... ", then couldn't say anything more.

Natsume giggled at Harutora's awkward appearance. "
.....Whatever, I'll forgive you this time, since after all -
everyone has times when it's hard to reveal things." After
saying this, she showed a happy smile as if secretly
enjoying a secret that only she knew about.

"Natsume....."

His childhood friend's words warmed Harutora's heart
.

He had always felt a dismal weight in his chest since
Touji had mutated, but this depression now gradually
melted because of the heat Natsume had ignited.

".....Thank you." He faced Kyouko and Tenma again.
This time, it wasn't to apologize, but to say thanks.

Kyouko shrugged her shoulders unconcernedly, and
Tenma scratched his nose bashfully. Harutora noticed
that he had always been mistaken, and his own luck
wasn't bad at all. Rather, he was one of the rare lucky
people in the world.

Finally, he cast a grateful gaze towards Natsume. His childhood friend grinned spiritedly, a sunflower-like innocent smile on her face. Harutora felt a sense of deja vu when he saw this.

"So this is where you were, Natsume-kun."

Just then, a teacher ran up to Harutora and the others.

Harutora saw the teacher's stiff expression and momentarily froze, thinking that something had happened to Touji.

However--

"Principle Kurahashi wants you, could you go to the principal's office right now?"

Part 3

"......What exactly is going on?"

Ohtomo asked on the phone with gritted teeth. He lowered his voice, but he didn't try to hide his anger.

But it was hard to blame him for being enraged, since until just now he had been mustering all his strength to treat students - students from his own class, those students who had developed spirit encumbrance when he wasn't there.

Ohtomo was in an equipment room of the Onmyou Academy building, which was a room storing magical tools for student use like paper for charms, pens, ink, and equipment. He had made sure that the students' treatment was wrapping up and sneakily slipped inside while avoiding everyone's gaze. As for the person who he was tightening the screws on, it was the person who had called him out today - the Mystical Investigator Chief Amami.

'Just let me go already.' Amami complained on the other end of the phone.

'Reports of what happens on the scene won't be shown to me here, and though it's indeed regretful that the Onmyou Academy students were involved in a spiritual disaster this time, who could expect something like them running into a mobile spiritual disaster attack during a practical exam? Probably only Miyo has that kind of capability.'

"I'm angry about Kagami! Why did that brat come out? "

'You bastard, could you have forgotten that Kagami's an Independent Officer? They bumped into him when he was exorcising a spiritual disaster - what's so strange about that. At the least, he didn't deliberately go over there to find trouble. More importantly, I don't know what Kagami did over there, but as far as I know, Kogure properly dealt with everything after he arrived. In addition, I should warn you, you aren't the only ones who were harmed.'

Amami spoke severely, and Ohtomo managed to swallow the response that he almost blurted out.

The situation of simultaneous spiritual disasters happening everywhere in Tokyo had long since sent the various big television stations' news programs into an uproar. Though it was a miracle that there hadn't been any deaths, there were quite a few people injured, and the majority of them had been injured from spiritual encumbrance. At the moment, every hospital that had Onmyou doctor consultants was packed full of patients who had come for consultations.

'Moreover, the spiritual disaster still hasn't subsided and we've already confirmed four Nue. I think you've already heard that these Nue separately appeared in the Demon Gate and the Rear Demon Gate, two each. Ueno and Shinagawa's Nue have already been eliminated, but the remaining two escaped without a trace and they're still hiding in the city. The Spirit Sensors are all being mobilized to various places in the city to search, but those Nue seem to understand stealth. Also, even if we find them, those Nue can fly, so it will be extremely difficult to capture them with normal methods.'

"Can't you just bring out helicopters?"

'The flexibility of helicopters can't catch up to Nue at all, and even if it would be a small matter to simply transport squads, it's troublesome to deal with a spiritual disaster in the city's sky. It would take a lot of effort just to get the relevant units beforehand.'

"Why don't we give that small matter to the Chief with nothing to do. Anyway, your contacts are so extensive, you should be able to put them to some use."

'What nonsense is this bastard talking about. You're so impudent as you call someone who's so busy they can't even talk.'

The previous Divine General and the current Divine General had childish tempers, arguing their mouths off.

But, the situation was indeed quite grave.

The Exorcist Bureau was using all their manpower to take down the Nue, but if they couldn't resolve things as early as possible, it was very possible that the government would announce that they would enter a state of emergency.

Two years before, Tokyo had experienced large-scale destruction due to spiritual disasters, and though the scale this time wasn't as bad, they still couldn't take it lightly. More importantly, the spiritual disaster this time was the behind-the-scene manipulation of the Twin-Horned Syndicate again.

'.....I'm very sorry that this kind of thing happened when you were being called out because of Mystical Investigator business. We didn't expect those helpers to take action this quickly. This is the fault of the Mystical

Investigators - no, I should say it's my fault. Sorry.' Amami expressed his apology towards Ohtomo, his tone sounding quite sincere.

Amami had searched for Ohtomo today in order to request his help grasping the movements of 'D' who was connected to the Twin-Horned Syndicate - in other words, Ashiya Doman's movements. Though Ohtomo had already resigned, Amami was his past boss after all, as well as a higher-up in the Onmyou Agency, so it would be awkward to refuse, even if he didn't have any intention of returning to the frontlines.

"Don't say that....." Ohtomo's momentum weakened quite a bit upon hearing his boss frankly apologizing.

".....I agreed myself to help out my old organization, so it's my responsibility. I don't blame--"

'Oh, I see, then never mind.'

"Hold on you old geezer, what kind of attitude is that? To think you're having me work for free yet your attitude is this arrogant!"

'Work for free? That's strange, Miyo-chan told me that I'd have to pay to borrow a teacher.....'

"That money-grubbing old hag! Why don't you hurry up and die!" Ohtomo cried out angrily, and Amami laughed on the other end of the phone: 'It's really like something Miyo-chan would do', making him even more annoyed.

'Anyways, we've currently arrested several members of the Twin-Horned Syndicate, but the leader is still out there. It's said that he manipulates the aura flow in the area, the exact same methods as Dairenji's.'

The former Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division had been responsible for holding demon extermination ceremonies and stabilizing the aura flow inside the city, and naturally they would be familiar with how to grasp the spirit flow. In the spiritual disaster attack two years ago, Dairenji Shidou had once deliberately disturbed the aura flow, leading to many spiritual disasters.

'I don't have time to listen to you complain since I'm busy to death right now..... Right, there was just business to tell you. The situation was just finalized half an hour ago, and it should have already reached Miyo-chan - the

Exorcist Bureau's Command Center intends to use the same plan of action as two years ago to deal with the spiritual disaster this time.'

Amami's tone turned serious. Ohtomo frowned, a bad premonition in his heart.

".....What plan of action? What does it have to do with the Onmyou Academy?"

'Two years ago, the Exorcist Bureau used bait in order to lure in the mobile spiritual disaster. Moreover, the thing mobile spiritual disasters love the most is a high-grade 'yin aura'.' Amami spoke carefully.

In the spiritual disaster attack two years ago, the main suspect Dairenji Shidou had let himself become a demon, becoming a spiritual disaster. But excluding him, many other spiritual disasters also happened simultaneously, many among them even developing into phase three. Dairenji who became a demon - a 'Type-Ogre' spiritual disaster - led the other mobile spiritual disasters to wreak havoc everywhere in the city, creating serious damage.

Facing that situation, the Exorcist Bureau had considered separating Dairenji and the other mobile spiritual disasters to be a priority, and hence had set a trap.

'.....The bait used back then was a dragon.'

"Dragon?" Upon hearing that word, Ohtomo almost jumped in surprise, finally understanding the meaning in Amami's words.

Though there were still certain types excluded from this, dragons' properties were basically yin type water aura, and they carried extremely magnificent aura. One could call dragons quite attractive 'bait' in the eyes of spiritual disasters who belonged to the same type of yin energy and who fell[49] and created 'miasma' due to a lack of stability. Two years ago, the Exorcist Bureau had utilized this characteristic of spiritual disaster, using a dragon as bait to lure in the mobile spiritual disasters.

When they were finalizing their plan of action, the Exorcist Bureau had settled on the legendary servant shikigami of the famous Tsuchimikado family. At the same time, they requested assistance of the dragon's

master, the head of the Tsuchimikado family at the time - as well as Natsume's father - to borrow this true dragon.

And now, the reputed 'Tsuchimikado family dragon' had been turned over to the next heir of the Tsuchimikado family, or in other words--

'I heard that the Exorcist Bureau is preparing to request the assistance of the Dragon's master, the Tsuchimikado heir Tsuchimikado Natsume, in order to use the Tsuchimikado family dragon as bait again..... Moreover, they have already obtained permission from the current family head, or Tsuchimikado Natsume's father.'

"That's ridiculous! Natsume-kun is still a student, what right does the Exorcist Bureau have to force him to come forward and help!"

"They requested, not forced. If Natsume-san were unwilling, I would convey his opinion to the Exorcist Bureau. Also..... Kyouko-san, please mind your manners when you speak inside the academy." Principal Kurahashi warned her angry granddaughter.

Other than the principal and Natsume, Harutora, Kyouko, and Tenma were also here in the principal's office. They had followed Natsume and rushed in together.

According to what the principal said, the Exorcist Bureau planned on using Natsume's shikigami Hokuto when they went on the offensive against the Nue. The plan was to use Hokuto as bait, luring in the Nue. Moreover, the person the Exorcist Bureau had sent to meet her had already arrived, and was currently waiting for a reply in another room. Natsume had bitten her lip upon hearing word of it, her face paling, and Kyouko and Tenma had been dumbfounded for a while, immediately exploding with intense rebuttals.

"Excuse my rudeness, but it's a bit too much to bring up this kind of request now when that kind of incident happened just now. The Exorcist Bureau hasn't

considered the current condition of the Onmyou Academy at all."

Even the normally amicable Tenma couldn't restrain himself, bringing up a protest to the principal.

This was indeed an unprecedented request. The Exorcist Bureau wasn't requesting to borrow information or techniques, but was requesting assistance in purifying a spiritual disaster - in particular, they wanted to use an individual on the main battlefield. That kind of situation was extremely rare. More importantly, Natsume wasn't yet of age, and it was hard to blame Kyouko and Tenma for immediately reacting so agitatedly.

The principal didn't say anything more after conveying the Exorcist Bureau's request. She didn't forcefully hold Natsume back, just silently handing things over for her to judge herself.

Also silently waiting for Natsume to make a decision - unexpectedly - was Harutora.

He didn't interrupt, quietly gazing at Natsume's face. Confidence showed in his gaze, and resolve could be seen in his attitude.

"My father, he....." After thinking deeply for a long time, Natsume spoke quietly to check - "My father, he..... agreed, right?"

"The Exorcist Bureau said so. Do you need to discuss with your father before making a decision?"

".....No, I don't need to." She frowned, straightening her back and declared prudently. "I'm willing to help."

"What?", "Natsume-kun!" Kyouko and Tenma hastily spoke out to stop her.

"Why don't you first discuss with your father, maybe you can temporarily give the dragon to your father to use ....."

".....My father is in the countryside, and he wouldn't make it in time even if he came now."

"Hold on, Natsume-kun. Maybe the Exorcist Bureau isn't looking for you, maybe they mentioned this kind of request because they thought your father was still Hokuto's master. If they knew that Hokuto was already in your hands, they'll definitely pick another way to resolve things. No matter how suitable the dragon is for bait, there should be something else that can replace it!"

"......But, since my father accepted this request, it has become a problem of the Tsuchimikado family. As a member of the Tsuchimikado family, I must bear this burden." Natsume spoke firmly.

A wry smile momentarily emerged on Harutora's face as he heard those words. Though it hadn't been evident recently, Natsume's burden and sense of responsibility as a Tsuchimikado was still like before, not even a bit changed.

Not only Harutora but also Kyouko and Tenma should understand very well that with her stubborn personality, Natsume wouldn't take words back once she had spoken them, but they wholeheartedly wanted to keep their classmate away from danger, so they didn't stop persuading her.

Just then, the principal calmly opened her mouth.

"......Kyouko-san, Tenma-san, it's regretful, but I fear that the Exorcist Bureau intended on requesting Natsume-san's assistance since the moment they decided their plan of action. Even obtaining Natsume-san's father's permission beforehand was just a formal action, because he is still underage after all. The plan of action

this time must have Natsume-san's dragon as bait to have meaning."

"That couldn't be, right?" Upon hearing the principal's unexpected explanation, Tenma was stunned, and it wasn't just him, as Kyouko, Natsume, and even Harutora also stared at the principal in shock.

"What does that mean, Grandma?"

The principal couldn't help but sigh as her granddaughter asked this.

".....I guess I'll tell you. The spiritual disaster this time is the same as two years ago - There is a high possibility that it is a terrorist action planned by Yakou fanatics, and Natsume-san is needed to come forward because of this. The Exorcist Bureau has judged that if Natsume-san is present, at the least they will not dare to act rashly."

Each of the four students' eyes widened as they listened to the principal's explanation.

The four people present - and Touji as well - had all fought against the Yakou fanatic who had come for Natsume last September, and they had experienced first-hand the absurd fate that Natsume bore.

"......So they want him to be a 'hostage'?"

"....."

The granddaughter brought up that question incredulously, and the principal didn't respond, just saying: "......Of course, since the Exorcist Bureau has these thoughts, they will ensure Natsume-san is safe and sound no matter the danger. In that regard, maybe acting in concert with the Exorcist Bureau is comparatively safer ."

The goal of the suspect who had brought about the spiritual disaster was unclear, but if the opponent was a Yakou fanatic, Natsume could be dragged into an incident at any time. Having Natsume join the operation could subdue the Nue, and it could also protect Natsume at the same time, which could be described as killing two birds with one stone.

"......Principal, would you please contact the Exorcist Bureau. I am willing to join the fight." Natsume closed her eyes, breathing deeply to calm her feelings, and expressing her willingness again.

The principal stared straight at Natsume, nodding lightly. Kyouko and Tenma bit their lips, saying nothing at all.

But - Harutora spoke. "Natsume..... You understand, right?"

Harutora's tone was firm, checking with Natsume as if it were an obvious fact. "Yes." Natsume's expression slightly relaxed, looking askance at Harutora.

".....It doesn't need to be said. The shikigami's responsibility is to protect the master." Natsume smiled. Harutora finally relaxed upon seeing Natsume's smile, but the dialogue between the two made Kyouko and Tenma just look befuddled.

Harutora hadn't opened his mouth at all while Natsume decided whether to accept the Exorcist Bureau's request, because he had long since decided that if Natsume agreed, he would head to the Exorcist Bureau alongside her. He had been confident in Natsume's judgment since the beginning, and he had made the decision to stay by her side no matter how dangerous the circumstances.

Just as the master and servant made up their minds, the phone on the principal's office desk rang.

An old phone was placed on the table, and the Principal picked up the receiver, uttering: "Yes." A shadow momentarily covered her face.

"Touji-san has recovered consciousness." She hung up the phone after briefly saying those few words, then notified the tense-faced students.

"Huh, really!?"

The four of them had been overcome with anxiety because of the principal's reaction, but after hearing that unexpected good news, their eyes all shone with happiness.

"But after he recovered consciousness, the teacher responsible for his treatment let him slip away out of carelessness. Right now, there are several teachers looking everywhere for him - he may have sneaked out of the academy building alone, without even his phone."

Then, the principal dropped the bomb, and the breath stopped in Harutora and the others' throats.

"The reason is still unclear. After waking up, his consciousness was still a bit fuzzy..... Honestly, the situation isn't so clear, and it might be that this kind of treatment method was counter-effective..... Maybe the willpower that originally suppressed the oni has weakened. Whatever the reason, we must find him as fast as possible."

The principal spoke, having difficulty concealing her anxiety. This was their first time seeing the principal with this kind of expression, and Natsume and Harutora looked at each other, not knowing how to respond for a while.

As the two of them were helpless - "......Alright, Harutora, Tenma, you go find Touji immediately. I'll accompany Natsume-kun to the Exorcist Bureau." Kyouko announced neatly.

Everyone's eyes widened upon hearing this sudden proposal. Harutora was undoubtedly the most flustered among them.

"W, Wait a second, Kurahashi! I'm Natsume's--"

"--I know you're Natsume-kun's shikigami, but you're also Touji's friend, right? Also, I think of myself as Touji's and Natsume-kun's friend as well."

Kyouko spoke decisively, her eyes giving off the same light that Natsume had when she came forth for Touji before, a firm and trust-filled radiance.

"Right now, we should work together and divide the labor. Since we need to go to the Exorcist Bureau, it may be more useful if I go, and in any case, I'm the daughter of the Onmyou Agency Director and the Exorcist Bureau Chief." Kyouko spoke impressively.

Upon hearing Kyouko's words, Harutora, Natsume, and Tenma all had trouble concealing their shock. The normal Kyouko always did her best to avoid mentioning that she was the principal's granddaughter or the Onmyou Agency Chief's daughter, and she wouldn't talk about herself being born in the famous Kurahashi family. Compared to the long since declined Tsuchimikado family that Natsume had been born in, the Kurahashi family's power could be said to be in its heyday, but she

wasn't willing to flaunt it at all and only wanted to have a similar, normal person status like the people around her.

Since she now brought out her father's identity, it was apparent how much she was resolved.

"Is that alright, Principal?"

"......There's no other choice, but, absolutely remember not to be reckless." The principal nodded, smiling.

Then, Kyouko showed a mischievous, serious expression towards the stunned and wordless Harutora.

"......What is it? Didn't you brag to Natsume-kun before , about courage and rely on us."

"......Kurahashi....."

Harutora had trouble speaking for a while, only able to look at Kyouko with wide eyes. Kyouko's cheeks reddened, and she embarrassedly moved her gaze away.

Natsume lightly put her hand on Harutora's shoulder. "......Harutora. Kyouko-san's right. You don't need to worry, I'll certainly bear my burden - I'll leave Touji to

you." Saying this, she squeezed Harutora's shoulder with force.

Harutora stood stock-still, gritting his teeth. Then, he reached out to the small hand on his shoulder.

"I understand. Then I'm counting on you guys. After everything's over, I'll get Touji to treat everyone to a good meal."

Chapter 4 - Destroying the Nue

Part 1

You're a demon.

He couldn't remember whether the first person that said this was a schoolteacher or someone he had hung out with. Otherwise, it was most likely his mother. Regardless of who it was, Touji had often heard those words since he had been small.

Touji was a child born to a mistress, a so-called illegitimate child, and though he wasn't hard-pressed financially, his father and even his mother had never given him much care. Because of this, he had been angry for some time, painfully hating his own misfortune, cursing the current world. At the time, he had fought with others left and right, fighting and arguing all day with incidents popping up one after another.

But he had also vaguely noticed that he was deliberately acting out a facade like this.

Whether adult or child, most people would expect him to show a demeanor that 'this kind of person' should

have when they heard that Touji was 'unfortunate', for example still being indomitable even with the misfortune , or having a surly attitude after yielding to the misfortune. The specific expressions were all different, but people all looked for a 'role' suitable for his misfortune - as well as a 'personality'. But Touji had unconsciously accepted that kind of message, replying to their expectations.

The best proof was that Touji hadn't felt anything about his circumstances since very early on. He didn't feel hurt, painful, helpless, or content with his situation.

But never mind if the people around him lost interest because of this, they would crown Touji with a new 'role'. Touji felt like a fool, but he didn't change his original nature, still fighting with others like always, fighting and arguing all day with incidents popping up one after another.

His mind was blank.

In the end, he only felt it dull and uninteresting. He could never enjoy his life through cumulative efforts to yield a sense of accomplishment, and he could only find joy through momentary, passively acquired happiness.

You're a demon, an emotionless demon.

He had never denied those kinds of words, and he truly thought that he was cold and emotionless. It wasn't that he didn't have emotions, but he lacked enthusiasm. He was a lethargic empty shell, performing a contrived interpretation of the role that others expected, with frequent inexplicable impulses forcing him to shout madly. His mind was still only ice-cold even in that kind of time.

Could it be that nothing troubled him?

That thought could never be banished from his heart.

He had never dreamed of a trouble like being attacked by a demon.

Part 2

As an effect of the spiritual disaster, the Shibuya street crowd was sparse even though night had just fallen, unlike usual. Though the streets weren't devoid of people, there were clearly much fewer than normal. But finding someone in a big place like Shibuya was still difficult no matter how few pedestrians there were on the streets. Harutora ran here and there on the streets,

desperately searching for Touji's aura - investigating for the residue of a peculiar aura different from a normal person's.

Tenma was currently searching for Touji's whereabouts as well, and Harutora had also ordered Kon to help investigate. In addition, there were also several Onmyou Academy teachers utilizing shikigami to search for Touji. However, the academy students' treatment hadn't completely ended, so there weren't actually many teachers who had come to help them search.

...Damn, where exactly did that bastard run off to?

The principal had said that Touji was still in a partially unconscious state, and the oni in his body had just had a row, and though it could be said that his body's condition had taken a slight turn for the better, his condition was still quite dangerous.

Especially now when the spirit flow everywhere inside the city was chaotic, it was hard to tell whether Touji would receive some stimulation and become an oni again .

"...Touji.....!"

The pedestrians who passed by Harutora cast suspicious glances at him one after another, and he had to gasp for breath many times, but he gritted his teeth and continued to search for his good friend.

Unfortunately, he had no idea at all what kind of place Touji would go to, and could only search here and there like a headless chicken. He almost hadn't rested at all after the practical exam, but he didn't feel tired at all, or perhaps it should be said that he didn't have the leisure to feel tired.

Moreover, besides Touji, he was also worried about Natsume.

Though he had promised everyone in the principal's office, he still couldn't be at ease when he wasn't by Natsume's side in this critical moment. He couldn't help but think of the incident that happened in September, especially when he heard that the spiritual disaster this time was related to Yakou fanatics. At the time, the two of them had split up because of a fight, and as a result the Yakou-worshipping Mystical Investigator had taken the opportunity to come in and abduct Natsume.

He understood in his heart that Natsume was in the middle of a group of specialized Onmyouji and that he should feel relieved, but the butterflies in his stomach went up and down without stopping.

".....Damn."

He couldn't control his fretfulness. As he ran here and there doubting whether this kind of mindless search could actually find someone or not, he couldn't help but look up at the sky.

Just at that time, several drunks rushed out from the bar on the side of the road.

He quickly came to his senses, but he still couldn't avoid them, and collided at the shoulder. Since he had been running, he fell backwards, managing to stabilize his body. The drunk who crashed into him screamed, tumbling onto the road. The faces of the other drunks who had come out of the bar with that person immediately went dark upon seeing this situation.

"S, Sorry!"

Harutora hurriedly apologized, but the others scolded him fiercely: "Hold on, you brat!"

There were three males on the other side, seeming about twenty or thirty years old. From their exaggerated dress and roughshod attitudes, they seemed like a group of punks. The man sitting on the ground was furious, his face red from anger. After he stood up, he glared angrily at Harutora, stepping forward.

"Hey, brat! Where are your eyes!"

"Uh, I'm really very sorry, I have important business...."

"Shut up! Who cares whether you have shitty important business!"

Harutora looked down and apologized but the other party didn't appreciate it. The other two companions didn't stop the man, but instead surrounded them. They looked like they were dissatisfied with Harutora just apologizing verbally and with a completely unconsternated expression.

...Oh wow, give me a break.

In the end, he had just undergone a phase three spiritual disaster attack and then witnessed a vicious Divine General playing with the spiritual disaster in the palm of his hand, so honestly, he didn't feel scared of being angrily insulted by street punks. He didn't hesitate to lower his head and apologize to save time, and maybe the man only pestered him without giving up because he had seen through his attempt.

Right now wasn't a time to get tangled up with others..... An irritable surge of emotions emerged in his heart, and maybe that surge showed on his face. "You want to die, brat!?" The man pulled at Harutora's collar.

".....Let go." Harutora said reflexively.

"What did you say!"

"I said let go....." Saying this, Harutora forcefully knocked away the man's arm, glaring back angrily.

The three men's gazes instantly turned vicious and they clenched their fists. Three against one. Touji who had originally been a juvenile delinquent might have a chance of winning, but Harutora really wasn't their opponent.

But, he truly couldn't take it.

Not only could he not stand this group of men, but also the Nue, Kagami, Yakou fanatics, and Natsume being unable to relieve herself of her arduous burden, and the fate that Touji bore. Various emotions were bottled up, and he could no longer swallow the fact that he and the people around him were met with all of these unfair encounters.

But just then--

"Fighting isn't good."

A gruff voice chipped in without warning. Harutora and the men all jumped in surprise, turning to look at the person who spoke, and then their eyes all widened at once.

It was a huge man, about six feet tall. Moreover, not only was his physique large, but his body was quite robust as well. The man had come forward at some point , but once they noticed him, it was difficult to not be awed by his strong presence, as if turning around and

noticing that a wild beast stood right there looking straight back - the impact the man brought to Harutora was that large.

How the three men felt was another matter, but the brawny man didn't give off a threatening feeling to Harutora, but an inexplicably elegant and shrewd air instead.

His deep features and his eyes, practically narrowed to slits, didn't seem strict at all. The man's golden short hair flashed like a crown under the illumination of the nighttime streetlights. The man wore a suit without a tie, and he didn't look like an average person, but he was definitely not the same as that group of drunks.

"Fighting isn't good." The brawny man repeated again.

"Especially this kind of silly fight where the people fighting don't feel any meaning and the people watching from the side also feel disappointed. Why don't you stop here, or I'll help you guys out and make it so that the fight isn't so stupid." Saying this, he smiled at Harutora and the others.

His body still didn't give off any threat, but he carried a kind of presence that couldn't be ignored.

The three drunks had long since been scared silly, and they quickly glanced at each other. "Let's go." They immediately and quickly left the scene after saying this, not even daring to drop any angry words.

"......It seems like their minds were pretty clear even though they were drunk. They saved themselves the trouble." The large man murmured after silently watching them vanish into the nighttime Shibuya street.

Harutora looked blankly at the large man, his original feelings that had been on the verge of exploding having cleanly dissipated at some point in time.

"Thanks for helping me out." He hurriedly lowered his head and gave thanks.

"......Are you looking for someone?"

"Huh?"

"Just now, I saw you running here and there nearby. Who are you looking for?" The man asked the surprised Harutora with a calm tone.

"Though I don't know who you're looking for..... If you're looking for a youngster who's wearing an uniform similar to yours, I just ran into one. His appearance was quite unusual, so I remember him very clearly." He continued speaking as if they were quite acquainted, not waiting for Harutora to reply.

"R... Really?"

Harutora hurriedly asked for clarification, and the man told him everything. Once he heard the location, Harutora almost moaned. It was near the place where they had held the practical exam today.

Harutora immediately got ready to move, but before that, he spoke to the man again: "Th, Thanks! Thank you very much!"

"Don't worry about it, go quickly."

"Yes!"

Harutora bowed his head deeply in thanks, then ran off. But as he ran, he felt like something wasn't right.

With suspicion in his heart, he quickly noticed the abnormality.

When he had lowered his head in thanks and rushed away, something had caught his eye. The left sleeve of the man's suit. It swung gently in the breeze like an empty sleeve.....

Harutora quickly turned around, but the big man was no longer there.

He felt strange, not understanding why his chest felt inexplicably impetuous. But finding Touji was the first priority, and he hurriedly pushed his doubt and suspicious feeling out of his mind, mustering all of his strength to sprint towards the place where the practical exam had been held in the evening. He fully believed that Touji was there, not even suspecting that the man could lie.

Run, run, run--

He ran forward single-mindedly.

Once he reached that place, and upon noticing that figure, Harutora instantly yelled: "Touji!"

Touji was in the plaza in front of an office building, where they had held the practical exam.

After the Exorcist Bureau arrived, they had stretched caution tape nearby, prohibiting normal people from entering. However, maybe because their manpower was insufficient, there weren't any people staying behind to monitor the area at the moment. The spiritual disaster area was close to silent and the traces of destruction were still shocking. It was really hard to associate this place with the downtown Shibuya in the Tokyo metropolis.

Harutora shouted, passing over the caution tape, and the solitary boy instantly turned his head around listlessly.

Touji was the boy standing within the caution tape.

But, it wasn't the normal Touji.

"......It's you, huh." He muttered, his voice abnormally cold and emotionless.

Harutora's body momentarily tensed up, memories of the past awakening in his mind. This wasn't the first time he had faced this kind of Touji.

In his tension, he gradually put on a splendid smile. Since the moment he heard that Touji had slipped out of the academy building, he had already prepared himself. No, more accurately, he had prepared himself to face this scene even longer ago, from the moment when he had been acquainted with and became friends with Touji.

"What do you want?" Touji asked.

"Does it need to be said?" Harutora replied.

He desperately regulated the breathing that had become chaotic from his running, and then straightened his back, speaking sincerely to his good friend:

"Let's go, Touji, let's go back together."

Natsume didn't head to the Exorcist Bureau main department, but the Meguro branch instead.

The person who had come to welcome her brought her directly into the branch office. The office was in a state of turmoil, pervaded by a tense, stormy atmosphere and everyone there having taut expressions. Even so, no one in the office seemed panicked, as expected of a department that had long since gotten used to sudden situations.

A group of black-clothed people - Onmyouji wearing the pitch-black miasma protection clothing that was the symbol of an exorcist - walked here and there in the corridor. This place could be named an active gathering of ravens on the absolute frontline.

Natsume and Kyouko, who had come along with her, were brought into a meeting room. The meeting room wasn't very large, with a slim folding table and a few folding chairs placed inside and a whiteboard hung on the wall.

Honestly, the two of them had originally thought they would be brought to an operational headquarters where a group of higher-ups would be sitting side by side. It was hard to conceal their disappointment when they noticed that they were entering such a small meeting room. But, once they noticed the people waiting inside

the meeting room, they couldn't help but gasp in shock, hurriedly standing upright.

The Divine Generals couldn't help but laugh.

"Alright, alright, don't be that formal. We were busy before and I wasn't able to introduce myself properly. I'm the Independent Exorcist Kogure Zenjirou. It's a pleasure to meet you, Tsuchimikado Natsume-kun, and Kurahashi Kyouko-san. Chief Kurahashi is usually always taking care of me."

Kogure spoke casually. He sat down in the chair, simultaneously pointing to the folding chairs and saying: "Go ahead and sit." The two bowed their head in thanks somewhat awkwardly and sat down alongside him.

Kogure's dress was the same as on the scene of the spiritual disaster, but he didn't have the tense feeling from back then, and looked rather leisurely. In particular, there was a wooden bowl of pastries on the table and a plastic bottle of Pepsi, and there was even an opened, half-read manga on the side. Yet the katana that had been strapped to his waist before was also to the side. These objects seemed odd when they were randomly put together.

"It's not very good to drink on the job." He shrugged his shoulders after he noticed the gazes of the two, completely mistaking their meaning. Then, he asked again: "Want some?" and proffered the entire bowl of pastries. They hastily shook their heads as soon as they heard that. Seeing Natsume and Kyouko decline, Kogure took a pastry himself.

"Sorry for suddenly calling you out here. It's a desperate situation after all, so please forgive me."

Kogure explained, chewing the pastry with a crisp noise and making them unable to help but want to ask whether the situation was actually all that desperate.

"Sorry, Kagami gave you lots of trouble before. That guy is really able, but he loves to stir up trouble and he makes heaps of it. I'm not asking for your understanding, but I hope that you will be able to put that matter to the side first during this operation."

"No, don't say that, the incident already passed."

"It's really a great help to hear you say that. Don't worry, I won't let that person have a chance to approach you during the operation."

Kogure chewed the pastry, promising readily.

Natsume felt extremely grateful when she heard those words. Before she had come to the Exorcist Bureau, she had always been a bit resistant in her heart, not wanting to run into Kagami again. She didn't say anything like ' that's great', but her expression relaxed greatly.

Then, Kogure stuffed the entire pastry into his mouth, munching on it and then washing it down with Pepsi.

"Alright." He clapped his hands and said: "I think you two have already heard most of the explanation, you'll be working alongside the Exorcist Bureau for this operation. I should first warn you that the mission this time is quite dangerous. For the most part, you'll be moving with me, or in other words I'm responsible for protecting you. I want you to listen clearly to my words and act according to my instructions, understood?"

Kogure spoke like the commentator of a game, but Natsume and Kyouko couldn't help but exchange a glance upon hearing that remark.

The principal had said that the Exorcist Bureau was relatively safe, but they hadn't even thought of something like having one of the Twelve Divine Generals

protecting them. That way of doing things was certainly quite reliable, as with a Divine General by their side, they wouldn't have to be alarmed even if Yakou fanatics came forth to intervene.

".....But, is that alright?"

"What do you mean?"

"After all..... It's a phase three spiritual disaster that has to be purified, right? But..... if Independent Officer Kogure is stuck protecting us, your fighting strength....." Natsume asked gingerly.

Kogure laughed openly upon hearing that, raising his legs and making a tapping sound with his sandals.

"You don't need to worry, the Exorcist Bureau is going all-out this time and there won't be any mishaps. If we don't resolve this situation tonight, a state of emergency will definitely be announced tomorrow, and maybe there will be a few government officials who have to step down to take responsibility. This could really lead to a situation similar to what happened two years ago..... Right, do you two know about the spiritual disaster terrorist attack two years ago?"

"Yes, we know."

"Okay, well anyways it's pretty close to that time. The Exorcist Bureau will do all they can to deal with the spiritual disaster. You don't need to worry, as the Chief will visit the scene himself if the situation is disencouraging. The biggest problem is actually whether we can successfully lure the Nue - but the Exorcist Bureau is the one studying this plan of action, you don't need to be concerned about such things, Natsume-kun." Kogure still spoke leisurely.

In some sense, those words sounded like he was treating Natsume and Kyouko like children, but since he was an Independent Exorcist of the Twelve Divine Generals, it was really hard to oppose his words. More importantly, the inexplicable weight on their shoulders had vanished because of this, and Natsume had relaxed instead.

"But, like I said just now, the mission this time is extremely dangerous, and I should want you never to grow careless..... Though I say that, there won't be any spare time to be lax after we arrive at the scene."

Kogure smiled as he spoke, holding the plastic bottle in his hand. In that moment, a bit of 'fighting spirit' seemed to peek out from Kogure's lax attitude.

"To say more, you are the linchpin of this plan of action, Natsume-kun. We'll assume full responsibility, but please remember this and stay careful."

"......Alright, I'll do everything I can."

Natsume had originally came to join the operation being burdened by the name 'Tsuchimikado'. Since she didn't have any intention of slacking, it was just as Kogure had said, she didn't believe she would have any spare time. She would have to work as hard as possible in order to keep from holding the exorcists back.

"Yeah." Maybe seeing Natsume's resolve, Kogure nodded his head in satisfaction. Then - "You really don't want any?" - he offered the pastries to Natsume and Kyouko again.

This time, Natsume spoke honestly: "Then excuse me", reaching her hand out. Kyouko also reached to take a pastry upon seeing this. They hadn't eaten anything since morning today, and seeing Kogure naturally made them

think of the ancient proverb 'the Emperor doesn't send hungry soldiers'. Maybe it was the calm and composure that he showed - or on the other hand, it could be the firm self-confidence that he faintly showed that gave off this feeling.

"Honestly, though you are Onmyou Academy students, I'm truly very sorry for pulling ordinary people - and even underage people - into this, even if you're a Tsuchimikado. I'll definitely return this kindness, so I'm counting on you this time."

"Oh no, I should be the one saying that."

"Right - I heard that Jin was your class's homeroom teacher, right? How's his performance? Is he a proper teacher?"

Kogure asked spiritedly, and Natsume and Kyouko were dumbfounded for a while, unable to understand what he was asking. They only realized after a long while that 'Jin' was Ohtomo's name, and their eyes inadvertently widened.

"Huh? Y, You know Ohtomo-sense-?"

Come to think of it, they had indeed heard from somewhere that Ohtomo had been a Mystical Investigator in the past, but they just couldn't immediately associate that useless teacher with one of the Twelve Divine Generals. Kogure's response surprised them even more.

"We didn't just know each other, we were companions. "

"I, I see, so you entered the Onmyou Agency at the same time--"

"Wrong, wrong, we indeed entered the Onmyou Agency at the same time, but we were classmates since we were in the Onmyou Academy."

"What? O, Onmyou Academy classmates?"

"Right, and come to think of it, is there a reason why it was so unexpected? There are Onmyou Academy graduates all over the Onmyou Agency."

Kogure spoke in incomprehension. From his words, Kogure - and Ohtomo - were actually all Natsume and the others' senpai.

"Right, what class of students are you guys?"

"Th, The forty-seventh class....."

"Oh, there are so many classes that's a big shock..... Jin and I were the thirty-sixth class, and people called us the 'Three Ravens of the Thirty-Sixth'. At the time, we were notorious for always bringing headaches to Principal Kurahashi."

Kogure spoke elatedly. Natsume and Kyouko listened with wide eyes and gaping mouths, surprise written from ear to ear. From Kogure calling him 'Jin' directly, their relationship was probably pretty good, but the two were really incredibly different. They couldn't imagine such a straightforward and reliable Divine General being good friends with that strange teacher.

".....Kogure-san seems very amicable, so he probably gets along well with everyone." Kyouko whispered quietly into Natsume's ear.

"On the other hand, Ohtomo-sensei probably didn't have any friends other than Kogure-san."

"Uh, it's very possible."

"Right? But it's really an unexpected combination..... Huh, weird, the thirty-sixth class? That means..... Ohtomo-sensei isn't even thirty? No way!"

Kogure looked at the whispered conversation of the two in confusion and incomprehension. Maybe he was recalling past events from when he had still been an academy student.

Then, Kyouko made a 'huh?' sound.

"'Three Ravens' means that there was still another person, right? Then, who was that friend--" Since the atmosphere was right, Kyouko asked unhesitatingly.

Kogure's face tensed up once he heard this, showing a shocked expression like he had made a tactless remark.

"Uh, well..... It's not really something to talk about....." Judging from that demeanor, he was quite unskilled at concealing his own emotions. He looked awkward in Natsume and Kyouko's eyes, clearly avoiding the question. Since he was showing this kind of attitude, they decided to suppress their curiosity and didn't pursue the question.

Just then, a door knock sounded in the meeting room. " Excuse me." A suit-wearing young man walked in.

The young man had two sharp eyes and a gentle face. His hair fell to his shoulders, and for some reason a lock of it had been dyed red.

"I'm sorry for making you wait, Independent Officer Kogure."

"Oh, you're here."

Kogure seemed to relax because the topic had diverged, waving his hand and greeting the young man. Natsume and Kyouko stood up respectfully, and he also stood up alongside when he saw that, unable to help but smile wryly.

"Let me introduce you, he is the Onmyou Agency Magic Crime Investigation Department's Hirata Atsune. He's going to be acting along with me. The reason is..... I shouldn't need to say it, you both know it well, right?"

Upon hearing of the Mystical Investigators, Natsume's expression instantly went stiff. Normally, there would be no opportunity for Mystical Investigators to show up during a spiritual disaster purification. As Kogure had said, she could think of only one reason why he was participating in this operation.

"Hello Tsuchimikado Natsume-san, I'm the Magic Crime Investigator Hirata. Maybe you don't want to hear this, but I know about your matters very well, including

the difficulties you're facing. A coworker of mine did something to damage our reputation last year, and as a Mystical Investigator, please allow me to offer you my deepest apologies." Upon seeing Natsume's reaction, Hirata spoke with caution. After he spoke, he bowed deeply to Natsume even though she was just a student, lowering his head to express his apology. His attitude was refined and courteous, and his clear and flowing voice gave an even deeper impression.

"I know that it's very difficult to ask you to immediately have faith in me, but it's an indisputable fact that the difficulty you face is too much to burden a single person with. I won't force you to trust me immediately, but you and I stand on the same side, so please allow us to do what we can and resolve things together with you."

"......Yes....."

The first time they met he suddenly said these kinds of things. Natsume was dumbfounded as she listened, and Kyouko's eyes also widened. Kogure was even more amazed.

"Hey, Hirata, it's good to have manners, but isn't that a bit too polite."

"There's no such thing, we have truly given him quite some trouble."

"But you're a specialized Onmyouji and the other party is a child, right? Look, you've even confused Natsume-kun."

"No, I, um....."

Natsume originally wanted to help smooth things over , but her tone was indeed full of confusion. On the other hand, Hirata was unaffected, still firmly maintaining that 'this is proper courtesy'.

"Well, I never thought that there would be a rare type like you in the Mystical Investigators, though old Amami and Jin aren't very normal either."

After Kogure muttered a few words with a wry smile, he said: "Let's all sit down first", taking charge of the situation.

He put his hands on his lap, showing a firm gaze and looking at Natsume, Kyouko, and Hirata in succession. With just that small movement, the atmosphere in the area instantly turned serious.

"We still have some time before the operation starts. So , I'll explain and confirm the contents of the operations, is that alright?"

Natsume and the others nodded their heads somberly. Then, Kogure began explaining what role Natsume was assuming in this plan of action in more detail.

Part 3

If I became a demon like this--

The thought had once emerged in Touji's mind when he was a spiritual encumbrance patient in the middle of receiving treatment inside the infirmary room 'sealed' all around by barriers.

If I became a demon like this, what a satisfying thing that would be.

He had always thought to himself that 'could it be that nothing troubles me?', but this could be called the troublesome situation that he had wished for, and also an exit opportunity that he had wished for. He still didn't feel that he was a patient who had fallen to the level of suicide, but he felt that becoming a demon certainly had a kind of hard-to-resist fascination.

The smell of blood made him restless.

He had been like that all his life with no regard for the outcomes.

If I became a demon like this - that thought became even more intense when the demon inside him was lively . The demon devouring him from the inside. Anyway, he didn't have anything to lose, and it wouldn't be meaningful for him to return to that old pain, suffering, and bleakness.

Once he became a demon, his life would be over like that. It would be a cleaner end that way, like god giving the last act of mercy to a failed product. No, maybe it was a sweet trap of enticement that the devil had set at the end.

If I became a demon like this.

Maybe that was proof showing that the oni inside him had gradually infiltrated Touji's heart. Under the effects of the oni's strength, Touji's consciousness became fuzzy, and his values changed and became ambiguous, his

originally weak will to live becoming even thinner. Touji's heart strode down the path of the demon step by step as he received magical treatment.

Then, the primary physician brought his own son over.

His name was Harutora.

Touji slowly turned around to face Harutora.

The bandanna that was normally tied around his forehead was nowhere to be seen, and the two horns that had vaguely sprouted when he almost turned into an oni had also vanished, but there were still 'traces' lingering on his skin. Touji would tie on the bandanna to hide the traces - and to temporarily hide the horns that grew when his condition went out of control.

"......How shameful." Saying this, a self-derisive smile appeared on Touji's mouth. But, he looked a bit unusual,

and his emotions seemed quite agitated, his eyes slack and unfocused, with only his voice cold as ice.

"The principal also warned me beforehand, but in the end I became like that right when I lost control. Even I myself think it's laughable."

He stared at Harutora, his face stiff. His morbid attitude was clearly different from the usual Touji. Harutora instantly took a closer 'look' at Touji's aura.

He didn't feel a demonic aura.

But there was the 'presence' of a demon, and Touji constantly gave off a strong demonic 'presence' from inside him.

A demon contained in the body wouldn't only affect the aura. Changes would appear in the mind that magic was unable to explain. The heart would gradually assimilate with the demon. But-- "......This isn't like you, Touji." Harutora returned Touji's gaze - returned that appalling gaze without fear.

"My dad said that the oni would dwell in the darkness of humans. You said back then that you had no enthusiasm and the demon had nowhere to dwell. Back

then, I thought that you were really a faker, but thinking carefully, it's laughable that you who wholeheartedly ' wanted to become a demon' were instead saved because of that."

Not only was Harutora unafraid, his tone was even challenging. He spoke as his eyes stared into Touji's, with no intention at all of backing off. When confronting a demon, just slightly revealing a weak point or fragility would end in a loss, and a powerful mental strength was especially necessary to be able to suppress a demon.

Strength of heart was necessary.

Harutora and Touji confronted each other in the chilly corner of Shibuya.

The corners of Touji's mouth rose, answering Harutora's challenge. Fangs hadn't grown in his mouth, but an expression like a demon's showed on his face.

"My thoughts are still the same. It doesn't matter to me whether I become a demon or not."

A self-derisive smile formed again on Touji's mouth. Destructivity, threat, and amusement were in it, like the deepest features of the smile that the delinquent Touji had always had on his face.

Harutora hmphed, scoffing it over.

".....Hey, what's wrong, Touji? Has your brain been eaten by the oni?"

"Who knows, I don't know whether these are truly my own thoughts or the oni's thoughts either - in any case, it's fine either way, these kinds of thoughts are already deeply rooted in my nature, and they can't be changed."

"Hmph, what 'nature'. You're just a year older than me , stop acting so arrogant."

"These are just the facts, Harutora. Sorry, I'm not the same as you."

Touji's tone was cold like a freezer, but his gaze gradually became heated, like hot melting iron. Though it had no magical energy, it tried to infiltrate Harutora's mind like magic.

But Harutora wasn't afraid, nor was he fearful. He firmly believed in the non-demon Touji.

"Hah, there it is, 'I'm not the same as you'.A cliche used by brats that don't want to admit they are one. You shouldn't always think about those useless things, you know."

"It's always better than an idiot who doesn't think about anything at all, right?"

"Not necessarily. People before said that 'actions speak louder than words'."

Harutora's persistent attitude conflicted with Touji. He didn't know Onmyoudou, but his father had seriously taught him many ways to deal with Touji, and right now he was doing his best to think of the various techniques that his father had taught him.

"Alright, let's go back, Touji. You know, I'm incredibly busy right now, and I don't have time to goof around with you."

"In that case, don't mind me."

"I'm not leaving because I can't do that." Harutora spoke, showing a firm, unmoving smile.

He trusted in the connection between him and Touji, reliably pulling him towards himself step by step, trying to pull him back. He and the demon were currently carrying out a tug-of-war competition over Touji, and he definitely wouldn't let go.

"After we go back..... then what?" Touji's expression changed. "I'll accompany you back, and then? Continue strengthening the seal, suppressing the demon inside my body. Exactly what meaning does doing that have?"

"What use is it to think about that? No one in this world can succeed instantly!"

"Could it be that you believe things will slowly turn around? What proof do you have?" Touji smiled coldly, aiming at his opposition's weak point and fiercely shooting out a sharp gaze. "If I live on in the future continuing to hold back this outburst, do you understand what kind of a life that will be? Do you get it, Harutora?"

The gaze Touji looked at him with extremely resembled a demon's, and Harutora tightly clenched his fists.

"......Touji, didn't you resolve to become an Onmyouji in order to deal with those circumstances? To suppress the demon inside your body in the future. There will be some day when the demon in your body can be purified completely."

Touji hadn't aimlessly accompanied Harutora in transferring into the Onmyou Academy, and just like how Harutora had a certain reason to aspire to become an Onmyouji, Touji was the same.

That was the after-effect of the spiritual disaster - the oni.

Touji had chosen to walk this road in order to save himself.

"Some day? Some day, huh....." The cold smile on Touji's mouth widened, and a chill inadvertently went through Harutora's back.

"I'll be able to solve my problem some day? That's the kind of thing a brat who doesn't know the world would say. I'll definitely be able to solve my problem some day, I'll definitely be able to solve my problem some day--! How can you be certain that there won't be a day when I lose control completely? When something like today happens again?"

Aura suddenly surged through Touji's body.

Aura.

But it was clearly a turbid yin aura.

"I'll be able to solve my problem some day? It actually doesn't have to be so troublesome. You know too, right, Harutora? If I just hurry up and become a demon and get purified altogether, I can solve my problem. That's the most reliable and the fastest, smartest method!"

Demonic aura swirled into an eddy with Touji as the center. His forehead jutted out, his lips splitting open to show his fangs, and 'lag' reactions appearing over his entire body. The profile of the oni gradually overlapped with his body.

The horns on his forehead and his fangs flashed as they extended, and the mist covering his entire body became more rigid.

Armor.

Armor from the Warring States Period[50] - or perhaps an even more historic era - appeared on his body, a wrist protector, breastplate, and a helmet with a visor. The half-transparent armor flashed alongside the intense 'lag', appearing and disappearing, completely covering Touji's Onmyou-Academy-uniform-wearing body.

Touji resembled an armored samurai as well as the figure of a ghost, as if he were the evil spirit of an unfortunate samurai.

The 'lag' even reached up to Touji's face, and the hideous impartiality of a demon emerged. Touji stared intently at Harutora in the depths of the mixed, interlacing shadows. For some reason, not only Touji, but also even the air that touched him gradually became sharp like a blade.

But, in this sharp air--

Harutora rushed in.

"Touji!"

Harutora's fist hummed, and he struck out with a punch using all of his strength, enough to punch through the armor. Touji's head flew back and he staggered backwards a good distance.

"You idiot, you're still saying that kind of nonsense! Let me tell you, Touji, stop being naive!" Harutora berated him with spit flying out of his mouth, Touji's demonic aura barely in his eyes, and flaring with an intense aura.

"Listen! The life of a brat like you wasn't your own since a long time ago. It was made by my dad's hard work and painstakingly tempered by Hokuto and I, Natsume, Kyouko, Tenma, and everyone you know! You ’re not allowed to be so reckless!"

The lambasted Touji widened his eyes in disbelief, staring at the fierce Harutora. Soon after-- "......Pff." He cursed.

"Don't talk big, could you be planning on fighting with the current me? It's not like you haven't seen my current

form. I could smash your head with a punch." Touji felt his chin that had taken a punch, teasing Harutora as if knocking him.

Of course, Harutora couldn't beat Touji, especially since the demonic armor bound to Touji's body was a symbol of the oni's strength, and the current Touji possessed superhuman power. Even he was completely sure of that. Therefore..... "I think this is just right." Harutora deliberately replied. The voice Touji mocked him with shook slightly, and that fine change didn't escape his ears.

He rushed in, swinging his fist. Touji's body naturally dodged the attack - Harutora didn't pay it any heed, still continuing to approach. He hit and kicked, with Touji dodging every blow. Touji saw through Harutora's attacks and didn't need to use the oni's strength at all. Harutora himself understood this point. He was just blindly attacking, and finally Touji couldn't help but sneer.

"Are you an idiot?"

"What's wrong with that!" Harutora shouted, throwing his whole body at Touji.

"Harutora!" Touji hissed, angrily swinging his fist, swinging the demonic fist covered with a flashing armguard.

Harutora didn't dodge.

"...!"

Touji's fist suddenly stopped, and instead Harutora's fist hit Touji.

He used his entire body weight to swing that fist, and the two tumbled into teach other, falling onto the ground . Harutora took the opportunity to kneel over the body of Touji, who was lying down under him, grabbing his collar with both hands and shaking him violently.

"What's wrong, Touji! Why don't you fight back? Hit me! You can't do it, right? Because you could crush my head with a fist! Because you could take my life anytime if you were careless!"

Touji clicked his tongue and gritted his teeth as he listened to Harutora's yelling, finally showing a wavering that belonged to Touji himself rather than the oni.

Harutora stared intently at Touji from up close like he wanted to see through him, then continued to cast his incantation.

"The two years you and I were together for weren't wasted, I saw long ago that you wouldn't be able to kill me! Get it? This is the second-class magic that the principal mentioned. I cast that magic on you - no, you cast it on yourself! Because you're a person who thinks about his friends! A mere oni can't crack open that kind of strong magic! As long as that magic isn't released, you'll have to keep fighting with the oni! Why don't you hurry up and realize!"

"......!"

Touji pressed his lips together.

Strength flowed out of his entire body, the demonic aura dissipated like smoke, and the 'lag' reactions gradually intensified, the image of the armor gradually thinning. The moment he looked into Touji's eyes, Harutora was confident he had succeeded.

He had succeeded in bringing Touji back.

He beamed and said: "You troublemaker," and punched Touji again. Touji moaned - and then fainted again.

After putting down his fist, Harutora slowly rose.

The demonic armor had already completely vanished, and for the sake of caution, Harutora used his spirit-seeing ability to 'see' that the aura on Touji's body had stabilized. Only then did he finally let out a deep breath, looking up at the sky. A numb feeling came from the hand he had punched with. With no one around, Harutora still clicked his tongue loudly to conceal his bashfulness.

"You're this old already yet you're still so hot-blooded.. .... you idiot."

Then, Harutora quickly called Tenma on the phone. Kon also hastily came over after he shouted several times in a row, but he deliberately didn't contact the Onmyou Academy or other teachers.

Tenma ran over, panting for breath, and jumped in surprise when he saw Touji lying prone on the ground, but he quickly noticed that Touji was just passed out, and breathed out in reassurance.

Touji didn't lose consciousness because he had been hit by Harutora's fist, but rather because he had started suppressing the oni inside him again. Harutora's punch at the end had given him a helping hand, and the goal of the blow was to shake up Touji's mindset.

But Tenma began worrying again when he finished listening to Harutora's next words.

"You want to go to Natsume-kun? That..... Then what about Touji-kun!"

"That's why I asked you to come. Sorry, could I ask you to help contact the Onmyou Academy and bring him back inside the academy?"

"B, But, who knows where Natsume-kun and the others are--"

"I sent them a text message notifying them when I found Touji, and I asked for their location at the same

time. They seem to be preparing for an engagement in the Meiji Shrine Outer Garden[51]. I checked a map on my phone, and I can run there on foot."

After Harutora explained to Tenma while sitting on the ground to rest, he exerted himself again and stood back up. His body and mind were tired, but there was still something waiting for him to deal with. There were troubling incidents one after another, but since he had become the shikigami of this kind of master, he could only bite the bullet.

"Tenma, do you have any charms on you right now? If you do, could you give them to me? I'm afraid the few that I brought won't be enough."

"It, It's no problem to give them to you..... but are you really planning on going over alone? The Exorcist Bureau is carrying out an important operation with their full strength, right? I fear that something like meeting up with Natsume-kun and the others will be....."

"Leave those kinds of things for later, since after all..... " Harutora smiled wryly, looking at Touji who was lying on the ground. "I talked pretty big. In any case, sorry for giving you a heap of trouble. I'll leave Touji to you."

Part 4

The shrine's outer garden was located within the bounds of Yoyogi[52]. The Meiji Shrine was a vast park stretching from Shinjuku to Shibuya, and there were many athletic-related facilities inside the park like the National Stadium and the Meiji Jingu Stadium.

The Exorcist Bureau had chosen a softball field that was the largest among these as the location of this spiritual disaster purification. Of the composite, diamond-shaped ball field made up of six surfaces, five surfaces were natural turf and one was man-made turf. The entire field was similar in size to the Tokyo Dome[53]. This place had been chosen in order to conform with time, location, and spirituality, with its unimpeded spirit flow, low risk of causing damage to the surroundings, and various factors all taken into consideration.

In any case, this was a wide, boundless place, and there weren't fences or outside barriers, with only trees encircling the surroundings. The lights in the normally brightly lit Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery and Meiji Jingu Stadium were all off today, making the expansive composite ball field look a bit more desolate.

At the moment, a group of ravens wearing black clothes that were even darker than the night were gathered in the vast, boundless field.

There was a tent erected near the north entrance to the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery acting as the temporary command post of the Exorcist Command Center. There were quite a few transport vehicles for the spiritual disaster purification teams parked behind it. In addition, there were movable altars positioned in a round shape within the area and barriers set down encircling the ball field to stop the mobile spiritual disaster from escaping. There were also two helicopters prepared on standby ready at any time as a precaution, in case something unexpected happened and it was necessary to give chase.

The surroundings were pervaded by a feeling of tension and the aura of the exorcists, making it hard to breathe and associating the coming spiritual disaster purification with an uphill battle.

At a distance of fifty meters above the heavily guarded ground.

A golden dragon - Hokuto - was drifting around the expansive night sky. Hokuto who was close to ten meters

long in total didn't seem as huge as before in this vast field, but the figure of the dragon roaming through the night sky was still filled with a mystical feeling in the eyes of the people who looked up from the ground.

However, right now Hokuto was showing a rare impatience.

Since it had received Natsume's orders, it had continuously been turning around in the same place. When it had been summoned, it had looked curiously at the scene on the ground, but it had quickly gotten tired of watching things like the Exorcists and the altar, feeling that they were boring. It often looked at the faraway tall buildings of Roppongi and the Tokyo Tower or the newly built high-rise district as if wanting to play over there.

Natsume stayed patient, ordering this willful dragon from the ground.

In the plan of action this time, it was necessary for Hokuto's aura to spread through the aura flow and proliferate through various parts of the city, Hokuto had to constantly release aura for this. Though this matter sounded simple, it was actually extremely difficult.

Hokuto was quite a strong shikigami, and materializing for a long time was an abnormally heavy burden to the controller. Natsume might be the first to collapse if the operation went on for too long.

"...You don't need to force yourself, Natsume-kun. If you collapse, that would truly be a failure upon a failure. "

Kogure whispered a warning into the ear of Natsume who was staring intently at Hokuto. Natsume replied with a "Yes", but her gaze, directed upwards, didn't move.

Natsume was currently right underneath Hokuto near the center of the ball field, with Kyouko and Hirata next to her. In addition, they and also the exorcists present were all staring at Natsume without turning away.

Several exorcists were currently chanting incantations, letting Hokuto's aura seep into the aura flow, but the other people were completely silent. At some time, the undulating tone of the incantation had assimilated with the background, and suddenly the sound of the wind blowing through the field became particularly harsh.

It still hadn't come?

Natsume practically heard the inner voice of the exorcists, and though Kogure wanted her not to force herself, it really wasn't her style to hold back in this kind of time.

She glanced at the tent that had been set up temporarily.

Including Kogure, the operation being held had four Independent Exorcists in total and one Special Sensor, five Divine Generals in total, and of course Kagami Reiji was also included among them. He was definitely sneering right now, looking with malicious intentions from the tent towards the center of the field. No, it was possible that he didn't even care and she wasn't even in his eyes. Regardless of which situation it was, she was definitely unwilling to shame herself in front of that man.

And there were definitely quite a few people who held complex feelings towards the Tsuchimikado among this big group of Onmyouji, especially for these exorcists who had to purify spiritual disasters day after day.

Tracing back the roots, the reason these spiritual disasters happened could be attributed to the ancient Tsuchimikado Onmyoudou family. However, the

techniques they used to purify spiritual disasters were also from the Tsuchimikado. What kind of feelings would the exorcists view her with right now?

Just then, the sound of rotors came from above her head. The sound came from a media helicopter, and there had been several helicopters in the sky above the Meiji Shrine outer garden at any given moment since just recently.

The contents of the operation were secret, so it wasn't certain where the media had dug up the information from. Just the same, it hadn't been made public that Natsume was involved in the operation, but someone in the industry would immediately realize that upon seeing the dragon roaming in the night sky.

...There's only one thing I should do.

Regardless of what the exorcists thought and how the surrounding people reacted, she only needed to properly complete the mission she had been assigned. This was the bare minimum to have any self-respect as a Tsuchimikado family member.

Natsume's expression was grim, her mind focused on Hokuto above her head. A bitter smile flashed over Kogure's face when he saw Natsume's appearance.

But, Natsume's hard work finally bore fruit.

'Mobile spiritual disaster spotted! It's approaching from the northeast - from the Demon Gate!'

The Spirit Sensor on standby in the tent noticed the Nue's miasma, and an alert immediately came from the speaker.

"......It's finally come." Kogure said.

Natsume hurriedly looked towards the northeast sky, and Hokuto also showed a perplexed appearance, turning its head towards the same direction.

The northeast, direction of Ichigaya and Iidabashi[54]. Not a single abnormality could be seen in the night sky obscured by darkness. But - "It's here.....!" Natsume's intuition said this and her mind naturally focused. Her mind and body also went tense once she noticed the abnormality mixed in with the black sky in the distance.

Right then--

EIEE--

A braying rode along with the night wind, and a twisted figure flying at a low altitude could vaguely be seen in the northeast.

'Target confirmed! A 'Type-Chimera' spiritual disaster, estimated two minutes until arrival!'

"Prepare to engage!"

The commander announced and the exorcists acted hastily, various orders busily being thrown about.

"......Good." Kogure relaxed his arms. "Natsume-kun, the important highlight is up next. Please follow the orders beforehand and have the dragon--" Kogure spoke as he walked towards Natsume. But when he was only half-done speaking, the sound of static suddenly came from the speaker. Then-- 'Th, The other mobile spiritual disaster has appeared! It's advancing from the southwest - from the Rear Demon Gate.'

"What?"

Kogure turned around suddenly and the exorcists preparing to engage couldn't conceal their fluster for a while. Natsume also hurriedly looked towards the southwest. Because of the trees nearby surrounding the ball field, she couldn't clearly see the low-altitude, but since the Special Sensor - one of the Twelve Divine Generals - had felt the spiritual disaster closing in, it definitely wasn't a mistake.

"Kogure-san.....?"

".....Uh, that dragon of yours is very popular. I guess this will save us quite some time."

Compared to Natsume's wavering and anxiety, Kogure was poised and showed a fearless smile, and the exorcists also had the same reaction.

'...Listen up, the mobile spiritual disaster approaching from the southwest is expected to arrive in six minutes. The operation will immediately change to 'Plan C'. From now on, the first approaching mobile spiritual disaster is 'Chimera 01', and the second mobile spiritual disaster is ' Chimera 02'. I repeat, implement 'Plan C'!'

The announcement came through the speaker again, the voice clearly different from before. "Plan C?" Natsume asked. "Don't mind it." Kogure replied briefly.

"Simply put, it's purifying two spiritual disasters at once, but we only have a tight opportunity to set down a barrier. Alright, let's fall back - Hirata, you guys come too." Saying this, Kogure brought Natsume from the center of the field to the fountain in the south. Hirata and Kyouko also followed behind the two.

The plan of action had suddenly changed, but Kogure wasn't visibly panicked at all. The exorcists had also only hesitated for a moment, and immediately prepared to engage according to the new instructions.

"Wh, What about Hokuto?"

"Before the second - before '02' arrives, we have to have it[55] standby in the air, but make absolutely sure not to let it approach '01', or it might accidentally get drawn into the purification."

Natsume and the others rushed towards the fountain, and just then the field was wrapped up by a hair-raising yin flow. Natsume noticed that her heartbeat was gradually accelerating.

She ran to the edge of the field and was taken aback in surprise.

Three figures walked out of the temporary command post. Because the sky was dark and the distance was far, she couldn't see clearly, but she could vaguely make out one man and one woman. The last person's body was quite familiar, the 'Ogre Eater' Kagami Reiji.

They were Independent Exorcists, the top of the nation - the current premier Onmyouji.

Just then - "Tch." Kogure hissed.

"The development progress is far more than I expected ..... The spiritual disasters themselves were manipulated. "

"Huh?" Just as Natsume couldn't help but ask, Kyouko next to her screamed.

The Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery was behind the temporary command post, and the dome in the center of the roof was the symbol of the shrine's outer boundary. Above it was a giant figure rumbling through the air, flying over at a low altitude. "Lights on!" After that order, the searchlights that had been prepared were turned on simultaneously. Countless beams of light tore through the black night and illuminated the giant black figure on the picture gallery.

The thing illuminated by the light... was a Nue.

The Nue's body was greatly different from when they had seen it during the evening. It had two long necks, a barrel-shaped body and glowing claws on its limbs. Its tails, however many there were, undulated like tentacles. Two giant bat-like wings grew out of its back, probably large enough to cover its entire body. That appearance seemed like a two-headed dragon, like the legendary dragons of the West.

However, not only was its external appearance different, but also the change in its body size was even more surprising.

Its unfurled pair of mammoth wings was no smaller than the picture gallery, and they were close to a hundred meters wide, with its body perhaps forty meters long.

"Wh, What's that? It's a monster!"

"...........!"

Natsume was speechless next to the stunned Kyouko who exclaimed. Hokuto stared at the Nue from the sky, seeming also to have taken no small impact from the gigantic size of the Nue's body.

On the other hand, Kogure and Hirata glanced at each other.

"......This is bad....."

"Yeah, it seems like there's a good chance it'll develop into a phase four."

Upon hearing the two speak, Natsume and Kyouko froze in place, dumbstruck.

The progress of spiritual disasters was divided into ' phases'. A distortion of aura that had no chance of recovering naturally was a phase one, one that could create physical harm was a phase two, and a materialized spiritual being was a phase three.

The next step, phase four, meant a rise in spiritual pressure, disseminating a high-density miasma, distorting the surrounding spirituality, and making the aura skew rapidly, leading to spiritual disasters happening one after another. A giant spiritual disaster as a fuse leading to the crisis of countless spiritual disasters happening successively, that was a phase four.

Also known as a Hyakki Yagyou.[56]

The Nue before them - 'Chimera 01' - had already grown to the point where it was one step from entering phase four.

"......But, this helps me out a lot, because we 'caught up' ."

Kogure grinned. As if receiving an instruction, the movable altar placed in the field simultaneously lit up with flame.

The blowing wind made the flame kindle rapidly, which climbed up in a flash like an explosion.

Just then--

...Namah sarva tatha gatebhyah sarva mukhebhyah, sarva trat canda maha rosana, kham khahi khahi sarva vighnam hum trat...[57]

Exorcists made hand seals, chanting in unison the incantation that Kagami had spoken in the evening, Fire Realm magic.

The flame on the altar burned with magical energy, shooting into the night sky like a flaming sword, slashing through the darkness and spewing white smoke.

Officially this was 'spiritual disaster purification', but actually they were going on the offensive against the Nue , 'subduing' it. Different from purification which prioritized the balance of yin and yang, subduing demons often used the magic of esoteric religious systems in General Onmyoudou. Because of this, the exorcists had chosen an esoteric magic as the major procedure of the current Nue subduing.

Fire Realm magic shot out from the altar like a cannon and hit successively on the Nue, covering its entire body in flame. It screamed mournfully, the high-density miasma contained in its cry washing over the field like a tsunami.

However-- "......ह्." On the north side of the field - Kagami who was closest to the Nue pronounced the seed syllable of the Kundali Vidyaraja, 'scattering' the wave of miasma closing in on the field. The tsunami of miasma shattered and dissipated like it had hit a rock wall, sprinkling large amounts of miasma on the field, which was then all burned and vaporized by the magic on the altar.

Because of the miasma's frightful ferocity, Natsume and the others who were in the other direction were not spared. Just then, Kogure slowly put his hand on the scabbard of the katana on his waist.

He didn't draw the sword, he just put his fingers on the scabbard, pushing the blade out slightly.

In that moment, Natsume and Kyouko didn't even have time to react before a sharp aura burst forth from the blade, cutting apart all of the descending miasma.

The Nue continued to soar upwards, and the Fire Realm magic continued to chase right after it.

Natsume came to her senses, hurriedly calling: " Hokuto! Quickly retreat!"

Hokuto opened its mouth, looking blankly at the intense battle that had suddenly begun. It probably didn't want to get involved, so it quickly followed Natsume's order, flying down over its master's head.

But, the Nue noticed the dragon's movements and quickly descended from under the covering of the Fire Realm magic, trying to attack Hokuto from above.

"Oh no! Hokuto!"

Natsume hastily asked Hokuto to evade, but when it noticed the Nue was attacking, it seemed to flare up in anger for a while, not to be outdone. Hokuto quickly stopped, twisting its body to intimidate the Nue above it that was several times larger.

"I, Idiot!"

Natsume ordered it to escape with a pale face, but it pretended not to hear, even roaring as if threatening the

enemy to 'come if you dare'. Kogure furrowed his eyebrows, his right hand going to the handle of his katana.

But just as Kogure was about to draw his sword, when the Nue hadn't yet attacked Hokuto, the male Independent Exorcist standing on the north side flung something into the night sky.

What the man threw was a magical tool used in Vajrayana[58] - a tokkosho[59].

The tokkosho carried a strong magical energy, giving off a sacred light and drawing a glowing path through the night sky like a surface-to-air missile. It cut apart the night sky, shooting towards the Nue with a hum and piercing the Nue's body in a flash, forcibly tearing one of the Nue's wings.

The Nue screamed shrilly, its body momentarily losing balance. 'Lag' reactions appeared over its entire body, and it rapidly spun in front of Hokuto who had stopped moving out of surprise--

It fell.

The impact accompanying the noise caused the ground to shake. The Nue happened to fall in the center of the field. No, this wasn't coincidence, but rather a ' certain outcome'.

Kogure, who had momentarily taken a guarded stance, said: "As expected of Miyachi-san", dropping his guard. Then, accompanying the impact of the fall, miasma rushed forth like a tsunami again - but the Nue fell in the center of the field, inside the circle that the altar formed, and the miasma was already burned away before it had poured out of the circle. Natsume and Kyouko - even Hokuto - could only watch, stunned and speechless.

...Th, This was..... the power of Independent Exorcists.

The 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka's power was undoubtedly strong, but the people here - the Divine Generals purifying this spiritual disaster - were even more powerful, whether it was Kagami Reiji or the man who had felled the Nue in a single strike. Not only were normal Onmyouji unable to match up, they even made others doubt whether they were human at all. Though Kogure still seemed leisurely, if he got serious, he should be able to display a power equivalent to theirs.

The field became a sea of flame under the strong magical energy.

Even so, the Nue still wasn't purified. The Nue that had been pulled onto the ground raged, and every time its twisted limbs beat the earth, its giant body leaped up like a fish that had been grounded, leading to an intense vibration that could be mistaken for an earthquake.

But even if the Nue was furious, it couldn't take flight again. The Nue being unable to fly had nothing to do with losing a wing, as mobile disasters weren't governed by physical laws. The biggest reasons were the altar surrounding it and the Fire Realm magic above it, blocking the Nue from escaping out of the circle. Moreover, there was also another magical energy covering the entire battle from above. That was a magic they hadn't seen before, probably cast by the other female Independent Exorcist.

"......It seems like things are going very smoothly."

"That's what it looks like for now."

Hirata's tone couldn't conceal his excitement, and in comparison, Kogure didn't dare to drop his guard, and his pessimistic gaze looked straight at the Nue.

Then--

' 'Chimera 02' has appeared in sight range!'

A shout came from the speaker, and only then did Natsume notice the presence of the other Nue. She hurriedly turned around to look in the southwest direction, unable to help but cry out in surprise.

The Nue was in Jingu Stadium, climbing on top of the towering electronic scoreboard like a wild monkey climbing tree branches.

She immediately noticed upon looking that the thing was the spiritual disaster that had disrupted the exam. Its body type wasn't like '01', but similarly, it had become quite large. With its body bent, it was already over ten meters tall, and even without counting the length of the tail, its body was perhaps on the order of twenty meters. Its head was like an ape's, with its round eyes reflecting the firelight and shining brightly, its tail dancing in the air, seeming ready to make trouble.

"...Natsume-kun."

"Yes!"

Natsume calmly and immediately gave orders, having Hokuto lead the Nue over. Hokuto seemed to remember this spiritual disaster - '02', quickly turning around towards the second Nue with an attitude like it were saying 'so I ran into this thing again'.

At the same time, '01' seemed as if it noticed that '02' had appeared, raising its two heads and crying out towards '02' as if asking for help.

'Chimera 02' roared to reply, then leaped violently like it was trying to crush the electric scoreboard, leaping higher and higher into the night sky.

'Prepare the barrier!'

An organized announcement came from the speaker, and the exorcists standing by on the side immediately raised their aura, transforming it into magical energy.

Then, '02' flew above the field, its shadow moving above Natsume and the others.

'Spread the barrier!'

A barrier of aura was erected along with the voice.

But...

"What?"

Kogure couldn't help but exclaim.

The spirit flow suddenly distorted. No, the word ' distorted' wasn't a sufficient description. The aura flow suddenly jumped, aura spewing out like a crashing wave , washing away the Fire Realm magic that the exorcists had spread, and even the magic cast by the Independent Exorcist. The aura flow spewed out an oppressive aura like a volcano erupting.

And '01' was above the spewing aura.

The Nue directly absorbed the aura spewed out by the spirit flow, not needing to spend any energy at all to consume the overflowing aura.

EIEE--!

As '01's gigantic body swelled further, and '02' lingered above receiving the billow of aura, the barrier that had just been set formed just in time. As a result, the barrier was completed, capturing '01', but with '02' still left outside.

"This is bad!" Kogure yelled, but unfortunately it was too late. The situation was in the same rut as the exam, and Hirata also regretfully shouted: "Damn!"

"The Twin-Horned Syndicate! Damn, where did they do this from?"

'02' felt the obstruction of the barrier, circling outside the field and roaring. But the body of '01' rapidly enlarged, and even though the exorcists chanted the Fire Realm magic again, they couldn't stop it in time. High-density miasma overflowed from the giant body, and the aura in the area momentarily twisted, leading to spiritual disasters, and not just one. With '01' as the center, spiritual disasters happened one after another, and among them there were several immediately blowing whirlwinds sweeping up the ground, entering phase two.

The current situation was just like--

'The spiritual disaster has started a chain reaction! ' Chimera 01' has entered phase four!'

This was the situation that the people here feared to see the most, and '02' hadn't been sealed by the barrier.

They could only let it loose to rage outside, and declare the failure of the operation - 'Plan C' here.

"Kogure!" The Independent Exorcist that had brought down the Nue shouted.

"I know." Kogure replied.

"Come!" Kogure thundered. The motorcycle stopped behind the fountain immediately started its motor by itself, speeding towards Kogure.

Kogure immediately jumped on the motorcycle, shouting: "Hirata! You go find the person from just now!"

"Yes!" Hirata replied, immediately charging out. Kogure showed a severe look as he stared at '02', different from the first impression he gave others. He planned on chasing it alone and resolving this problem by himself.

"Natsume-kun, I'm sorry, but please stay back. You can ask the exorcists nearby to protect you, and the same goes for Kyouko-kun. You don't need to worry about '01'. Though it's entered phase four, this group will definitely

succeed in the purification! So..." Natsume had already rushed at Kogure when he was already half-finished, jumping on the backseat of the motorcycle.

"Hey!' Kogure was greatly surprised, having difficulty concealing his anger.

"Luring the Nue requires Hokuto! I'll go too!"

"...!"

Kogure's eyes widened, speechless for some time. Natsume didn't pay him heed, forcefully releasing Hokuto's materialization on her own.

"N, Natsume-kun!"

Kyouko exclaimed, but Natsume stared straight at Kogure without turning her head. Hirata who had already charged out couldn't help but stop his feet, looking up at Natsume and Kogure.

After a moment, Kogure beamed with a smile.

"...Alright, but remember not to tell Jin."

"Yes!"

'01' was closed inside the barrier, and '02' gradually left the field in order to avoid the barrier, seeming to be escaping alone, leaving '01' behind.

Kogure's motorcycle made a rumbling noise. Kyouko was flustered, not knowing what to do.

"N-N-N, Natsume-kun?"

"Kurahashi-san! I'm going!"

Kogure's motorcycle sped out, chasing the Nue.

Part 5

"Are you awake?"

Before him was Principal Kurahashi's steady smile. Touji sat up immediately once his head cleared up.

This was the Onmyou Academy. Touji had been especially sent to a classroom used for practical training.

He reflexively reached out his hand to feel his forehead. No horns. He relaxed - then his heart leaped again.

"What about Harutora? He--"

The Principal smiled wryly as she looked at the student asking this of her, then waved her hand lightly, motioning towards the LCD television in the corner of the classroom.

Once he saw the image on the television screen, Touji's eyes inadvertently widened, and he groaned listlessly. The television was currently broadcasting the scene of a spiritual disaster, broadcasting an image shot from above - by helicopter. Maybe they had judged that getting close would be dangerous, so therefore they were filming from afar, but the image still vividly portrayed the scene's tense atmosphere on the television.

Intense fire leaping everywhere.

Exorcists chanting incantations.

A giant, fearsome Nue.

Touji looked up at the principal with a rigid face.

".....Is this a joke? Could Harutora have run over there ?"

"Right, and actually Natsume-san and Kyouko are currently in that place. According to Tenma-san, Harutora-san immediately hurried over when you returned to normal."

The principal simply explained to Touji how Natsume had accepted the Exorcist Bureau's request for assistance and the ins and outs of how Kyouko had ended up accompanying her. Touji's comprehension ability was strong, and he immediately grasped the course of events.

"......That idiot....." He murmured those words, then couldn't say any more.

"He's really a troublesome child." The principal also smiled wryly to agree with Touji's opinion.

Then, the principal frowned, deliberately informing him with a businesslike tone:

"...Touji-san, I have something to report to you."

"R, Report?"

"Yes. We were amplifying your 'seal'..... you probably won't understand the situation if I say it like that, right? Simply put, after you were sent to the academy building,

we had already strengthened the most important part of the spell, and we were releasing the other parts of the seal. I fear that's the reason why you showed signs of demon transformation after you awoke recently."

The principal's casual explanation gave Touji no small impact. He suddenly stared at the principal, unable to respond for some time. After a while, he murmured a question, unable to hide his shaking voice: "......Why....."

"After the exam, when you were sent back to the academy building, I quickly contacted Harutora-san's father, truthfully reporting your condition." The principal replied resolutely.

"......M, My doctor?"

"Yes. After hearing of your condition, he expressed: ' Since my son is still functioning normally, I hope that you can allow the treatment to progress to the next stage. ' We prepared a new operation on the spot, the treatment I just mentioned..... amplifying the seal."

...Do you understand if I put it like this? The principal continued to speak with caution.

"Your 'treatment' already progressed to the next stage just now. You are no longer simply suppressing the oni, it is more like 'regulating', bringing the oni under Ato Touji's control. For someone with a condition like yours, this kind of treatment method is extremely dangerous in a sense - In other words, this is a strong medicine."

"....."

Touji didn't speak, silently staring at the principal. The principal faced Touji's gaze head-on, her expression still serious.

"Do you know why this is?"

".....I don't know."

"Since you came here and made the decision to become an Onmyouji, the treatment method has changed from simply binding the oni and eliminating the effects on your body as much as possible to actively using the oni's strength. Doing this is to allow you to have one more choice, to give you the right to not only beat back the oni, but instead to 'use the oni'."

".....Oni....."

Use?

Those words struck Touji's ears like a thunderbolt.

Spiritual disaster after-effects. Losing the future obstacles. Having a defect different from others.

The oni inside his body had always played a hateful role that endangered him, and he originally thought this was 'natural', but now that the choice of 'using the oni' had suddenly been added, he only felt confused inside.

"...Independent Officer Kagami is named the 'Ogre Eater'." A tremor ran through Touji's body when he heard this. "Do you know why he has that nickname?"

"......No, I don't."

"I thought as much - then allow me to tell you. He uses an oni, a powerful oni that succumbed to his hand. He doesn't summon it, but he directly absorbs the oni's strength, making the oni into his 'food' instead. The origin of his strength is the oni that he uses."

The principle's words made Touji gape again. He vividly recalled Kagami's tremendous strength. That was

an oni's strength? The strength of a spiritual disaster - a 'Type-Ogre'?

The same as himself.....

"But..." A smile finally appeared on the principal's face when she said this. But she wasn't smiling tenderly, and it was filled with provocation instead. "Don't forget the words your primary physician said. Your treatment will enter the next stage because you fulfilled a rule."

Touji very clearly understood the meaning in the principal's words.

Since my son is still functioning normally...

The treatment this time was only meaningful if Harutora could restrain Touji and keep him from completely losing control.

"....."

Touji turned his gaze to the television again. The principal nodded her head in satisfaction upon seeing this.

This was definitely a kind of second-class magic.

"What do you want to do?" The principal knew how Touji would reply, but raised the question anyway. Since she had supported the magic community from behind the scenes for over half a century, the Onmyou Academy principal's magic wouldn't be mistaken.

Touji advanced straight ahead, with Principal Kurahashi following behind.

"Master, you seem to be in quite a pleasant mood tonight."

"Could we ask if something good has happened?"

The two Komainu on either side of the academy building's main entrance chatted. They were the Onmyou Academy's guards, the mechanical shikigami

Alpha and Omega. Principal Kurahashi smiled and replied to the shikigami's question, but Touji, who was walking in front, didn't even look at them.

After walking out the door, the wind blew Touji's hair, which wasn't tied under the bandanna, into a mess.

"Sending me out here is enough."

"Hold on, I have something to give you." Saying this, the principal took out a charm from her clothing. "..... This originally wasn't something that I could use..." She explained, then chanted an incantation, releasing the shikigami.

A majestic white horse appeared accordingly, a black saddle and red reins draped on its body. It was stern and imposing, with a dignified manner. Touji knew this white horse's identity with a glance, casting an inquisitive gaze towards the principal.

"Principal, could this be.....?"

"Right, it seems that you heard from Harutora-san. This is the Tsuchimikado family shikigami, Yukikaze."

The white horse - Yukikaze - brayed, stomping its hooves and staring fiercely at the foreign summoner before it.

"Actually, this is a charm that Natsume-san's father sent me. It arrived in the evening - just when you were conducting the exam." The principal spoke to the surprised Touji.

"Wh, Why did he send the charm over?"

Harutora had mentioned the Yukikaze was a legitimate shikigami that had served the Tsuchimikado for generations. This kind of important charm couldn't be entrusted to someone for no reason, not even the Onmyou Academy principal.

But the principal just smiled and shook her head.

"I don't know that either, but..... I fear he already had a premonition, since he can also read the stars, after all." She replied.

Touji's lips thinned.

He felt as if others were manipulating everything, as if everything had been set and he was just moving forward following a path that had already been laid down. But - so what. In the eyes of the people with the strongest power or the vastest knowledge, his current self was just a piece. Complaining was to no avail, and the most important thing before him was to walk his own path and advance straight ahead on the road that he chose. Since someone had prepared the horse in advance for him, he really had no right to grumble.

Touji made his decision, looking into Yukikaze's eyes.

".....Maybe you've never heard of me, but I know about you. I heard you were an extraordinarily strong shikigami, can you help me out?"

He didn't know whether Yukikaze could understand human speech, but Yukikaze stomped its hooves after hearing, leisurely turning its head like it was telling him to stop speaking nonsense and hurry up and mount.

Touji grinned, taking the reins, stepping on the stirrup, and lightly sitting on Yukikaze's back.

Just then, the automatic doors of the academy building opened and a student rushed out, shouting: "Don't leave yet, Touji-kun!"

"Tenma?"

"Good, I made it!"

Tenma who had rushed out of the academy building held a staff to his chest. It was the shakujou that Ohtomo had specially made for Harutora. He ran breathlessly, looking up at the stunned Touji on the horse.

"......Haha, great. Honestly, I didn't have much confidence."

"Confidence?"

"Yeah, the confidence that I could look at you like normal after I learned of your situation." After saying this, Tenma held out the shakujou that he had carefully brought over, giving it to Touji who sat on Yukikaze. "I know that I'm not very good at dealing with this kind of thing, but..... it seems like I was unaffected. That's really great. Touji-kun is Touji-kun, and even a spiritual disaster won't change that fact."

"You....."

Touji was speechless for a while, but Tenma showed him his usual naive expression.

"Can I ask you to give this to Harutora-kun? I think he will definitely be able to use it."

"......Alright, leave it to me." Touji silently stared at Tenma's smile for a long time, replying with extreme gratitude and taking the shakujou.

"...Yeah, I'm counting on you." Tenma spoke firmly. Touji couldn't help but turn away - then he turned back, nodding towards Tenma.

"......I'm going." Then, he spoke to the principal.

"Take care."

He grasped the shakujou, lightly patting Yukikaze's neck and lightly murmuring into its ear: "......This is my first time riding a horse, but I have some experience riding a motorcycle without a license. Don't hold back, run as fast as you want."

Yukikaze jerked its body, as if wanting Touji not to compare him with that kind of inferior good. Then, it lightly raised its front leg, sprinting out.

There was only one destination.

"Alright, let's go!"

Under the principal's gaze and Tenma's encouragement--

Touji and Yukikaze dashed to the battlefield.

".....They've gone." Tenma murmured after watching Touji and Yukikaze leave.

The principal on the side suddenly turned her gaze towards the academy building towering next to them. "... The rest is up to him..... That sentence seems unnecessary." She muttered lightly, smiling slightly.

"You're more fitting for the role of a teacher than I expected. I'm counting on you, Ohtomo-sensei."

Part 6

Harutora sprinted quickly through the nighttime Shibuya street. Then, he inadvertently stopped his feet, raising his head to look up. A red flame suddenly burned in the night sky.

"Has it started.....?" Harutora muttered breathlessly.

He was currently entering Shibuya's Aoyama street, heading north on the road. He had thought of getting a taxi, but unfortunately there weren't any around currently. There weren't any pedestrians either, so it seemed that traffic control might have been implemented on this road.

Aoyama street belonged to the nearby main streets, and tall buildings towered along the road. Because of this , even if he could see the tint of red in the night, he couldn't see what exactly was happening underneath because the buildings blocked it. He was anxious, but he could do nothing other than desperately rush forward without stopping. But his physical strength had long since approached its limits since he had sprinted continuously.

"H-H-Harutora-sama! I fear to transgress, but perhaps I should carry Harutora-sama--!"

"N, No.....! I'll need your help in a while, since the enemy can fly after all..... Conserve your strength for now!" Harutora panted, ripping the healing charm stuck to his chest off after refusing his shikigami's proposal and switching it for a new charm.

Thinking carefully, he noticed that after that summer day last year, he hadn't run a great distance with all of his strength since he had sprinted through the typhoon towards Natsume - towards the main family residence when the Armored Juggernaut had killed Hokuto. Compared to that time, it shouldn't be a problem to continue running.

No, he had to run. The Harutora from back then had charged forward without thinking to escape Hokuto's death, but the him right now was sprinting to help Natsume - to guard her from her side.

Right now was more of a time when he had to run with all his strength.

".....Hah.....Alright, I'm fine! Let's go!"

Harutora shouted out, gritting his teeth and beginning to dash forward with all his might again. Because she couldn't overcome her stubborn master, Kon hmphed

and floated in midair, following right behind the sprinting Harutora.

Not long after..... "...! Kon! Can you hear that sound?"

"Y, Yes, it is the cry of a Nue, and..... I can feel a slight miasma!"

Just as they shouted at each other to confirm, a crossroad showed up in front of them. It was the Aoyama marked crossroad, with the billboard proclaiming the 'Meiji Shrine Outer Garden' visible on the side. Harutora called out excitedly, and then charged ahead at full speed.

Once he ran to the crossroad, the tall buildings momentarily blocked his vision, and he suddenly lost his line of sight. Stands of trees grew on either side of the road, and red flame was in the distant night sky. He could even 'see' a giant magical wall about as large as the Tokyo Dome.

A barrier. Magical energy with the feeling of fire was raging inside the barrier, and also inside it was--

".....Wh, What the hell is that?"

That thing momentarily flashed before his eyes and then was immediately concealed behind the trees, no longer visible.

But, in just that moment, he was able to see the behemoth that destroyed the sense of distance. Harutora couldn't help but stop, bending his body and putting his hands on his knees.

"I, I didn't see wrong, right? That's a monster....."

He spoke breathlessly. It was simply a bad joke or even a nightmare. They had to mobilize tanks or fighters to be able to deal with it. Was Natsume truly battling with that kind of monster?

Just then, Kon who was hovering over Harutora's head checking the battlefield situation reported: "H, H-H-Harutora-sama! There's another Nue - I, It has escaped outside the barrier!"

Upon hearing the shikigami's report, Harutora quickly stood up.

He straightened his body, trying to see the situation, but unfortunately the trees blocked his vision. Since the barrier and the Nue were so gigantic, he couldn't even

get a sense of the distance, and he couldn't distinguish how far the distance actually was to the spiritual disaster area.

In any case, he could only take a closer look. "Damn it! " Harutora ran again.

He ran to the crossroad and took the left road. It was a straight road through the center of the shrine's outer garden.

Over there was the famous Ginkgo Tunnel, a road with rows of ginkgo trees trimmed into conical shapes planted on either side and neatly arranged along the road. Though their leaves had just fallen in this period of time, the artistic scene still moved one's heart.

Originally, the unique outer facade of the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery could be seen at the other end of the straight Ginkgo tunnel, but right now he could only see a crimson flame burning on an altar on the other end of the orderly rows of ginkgo trees. The giant Nue was thrashing madly in the flame, a really unrealistic scene.

It was as if he had one foot on the road to the underworld and got a glimpse of the burning hell.

Harutora couldn't help but gasp, and Kon also cried out, her body shaking, eyes wide, and mouth agape.

He actually really wanted to ignore this, turn straight to the right and go back the way he came, but he couldn't do that. There was hardship waiting for him in that hell.

"......I'm going now." Harutora made his decision, murmuring several words and dashing with all his strength in the dead center of the Ginkgo Tunnel's road. Kon flew behind him with a similarly tense expression. He had decided to think later about how exactly he could help, as in any case, right now he had to get to Natsume's side. He didn't want to repeat the mistake from last year of letting Natsume and the Yakou fanatics cross paths.

However, Harutora's master didn't wait for her shikigami.

A Nue's cry suddenly sounded in the night sky above him, and immediately after came a roar.

It was a dragon's roar.

"Hokuto?"

Harutora looked up at the night sky, noticing that behind the ginkgo trees to his left was a giant Nue floating in midair along with a dragon battling with it.

The sound of an oncoming motorcycle's exhaust came between the roars of the spiritual disaster and the shikigami.

He hastily turned around to look forward, noticing that a motorcycle was rushing straight at him through the Ginkgo Tunnel. The exorcist who had hurriedly rushed off after the Nue from the evening escaped, the Divine General Kogure Zenjirou, was riding it. But, he wasn't the only one on the motorcycle, behind him was also a person with flowing black hair--

"Natsume?"

His doubt was immediately answered.

"Harutora!"

After Kogure and Natsume got on the motorcycle, they circled around the round fountain, leaving the field and speeding onto the road. They turned right, going along the outer edge of the ball field, with the Ginkgo Tunnel on their left.

Kogure looked up at '02' which was trying to fly away from the field.

"It's better to block it rather than wait for us to catch up. Dasai! Kokuryuu! Reisen! Hou'oubiden!"

He summoned his shikigami in a strong voice. No, actually they had long since been summoned. The motorcycle engine suddenly rumbled, and four clumps of aura spilled forth from the motorcycle Natsume and Kogure were riding, materializing. Four figures that she had seen that evening emerged - four crow tengu.

Natsume couldn't help but exclaim: "A mechanical-type? No, but, just now, that.....?"

A mechanical-type referred to a shikigami whose vessel was directly a physical body. For example, Alpha and Omega of the Onmyou Academy that used two Komainu as vessels, and the Armored Juggernaut that Suzuka manipulated all belonged to this type. Kogure's motorcycle could act on its own as if it had a life, perhaps because this motorcycle itself was a shikigami. After the crow tengu left one by one, the motorcycle seemed to become heavier than before.

Normally, a mechanical-type shikigami was one with its vessel, but Kogure's crow tengu could stay in their vessel and could also materialize separately, which were unprecedented specimens.

After the shikigami left, Kogure rode the motorcycle, hastily explaining to the dumbstruck Natsume: "They aren't quite the same as ordinary shikigami." Then, he looked up at the crow tengu flying above his head. "Stop the Nue's movement! Don't let it escape outside the outer garden, quickly!"

After receiving Kogure's orders, the four crow tengu cawed loudly, flying towards the Nue.

Compared with the Nue's gigantic body, the crow tengus' small bodies were like peas. However, they carried a strong aura in their body that couldn't be judged from their external appearance. After all, they were the shikigami of an Independent Exorcist, and a normal shikigami couldn't be compared with them.

Natsume stared at the four crow tengu flying at '02'. The shikigami's flying speed seemed far superior to the Nue's, and they caught up to it in a flash, surrounding it on four sides.

'02' roared threateningly, lashing out its long tail. The tengu keenly avoided the attack and wheeled around the Nue from four sides. They didn't attack recklessly, but strictly followed their master's instructions, stopping the Nue's continued escape.

Not long after, the Nue began descending towards the ground. It seemed to be different from '01' which had two wings, and wasn't very good at staying in the sky. Its body was frighteningly agile, able to move while ignoring weight. Though it wasn't 'flight', and could only be called 'jumping', the Nue still leaped through the air.

'02' descended to the place where it had just been - the Jingu Stadium. "Alright." Kogure spoke, seeming like he had everything under control. The motorcycle had already been driving towards the stadium, and the back entrance drew up ahead of them.

"We'll charge in and purify it inside the field!" As he said this, Kogure's motorcycle rushed into the field from the road.

But-- "Ah, those idiots!" Kogure slanted the motorcycle , hastily stopping it. He had seen the Nue break through the crow tengus' surround, leaping up again.

"What the hell are you all doing?"

"Ga! It tricked us!"

"Zenjirou! It's very smart, it saw through your plan!"

It seemed to have faked escaping into Jingu Stadium, then immediately leaped up. Getting the Nue into the field could minimize the damage, and the Nue had long since expected that move.

"Less chatter, hurry up and chase it! Next is - the Chichibunomiya Rugby Stadium[60], and after that is Aoyama, we definitely have to deal with it there!" Kogure roared angrily, his face flushed from anger.

The crow tengu chased the Nue again and Kogure adjusted the motorcycle, turning a big curve and returning to the road they had come from.

Natsume chewed her lower lip. Then-- "Hokuto, don't let the Nue escape!" She summoned Hokuto who she had dematerialized earlier.

Kogure was taken aback, unable to help but turn around.

"I'll help too!"

"......Alright, we'll keep up."

The motorcycle sped over the asphalt road. Above her head could be seen the materialized Hokuto grudgingly accepting Natsume's order, flying through the night sky towards the Nue. With the dragon come to assist, the crow tengu happily went at full speed.

After '02' noticed the dragon, it immediately turned around and roared. Hokuto roared back when it noticed, crushing the Nue's roar head-on. Hokuto and the Nue fought in midair, descending towards the rugby stadium.

"......Alright."

Kogure stared intently at the midair battle, his motorcycle speeding towards the fountain again. This time it turned right, entering the Ginkgo Tunnel.

They advanced straight ahead. Kogure pressed on the gas, accelerating the speed in a flash.

Just then--

"Natsume?"

She even thought she had misheard. Natsume suddenly raised her head from behind Kogure, leaning her body forward slightly.

The wind beat her face and her black hair danced messily behind her, the wind pressure forcing her to

narrow her eyes as she did her best to see ahead clearly. She doubted her own eyes, but a smile inadvertently emerged on her lips.

Kogure seemed to notice the figure ahead - Harutora. He murmured "Harutora?", and just as he planned on questioning Natsume, "...!" he suddenly braked. The motorcycle made a piercing sound of friction, leaving tracks on the surface of the asphalt road. Natsume who had leaned forward almost tumbled onto the ground, and hastily grabbed tightly onto Kogure's shoulders.

Kogure held tightly onto the motorcycle's handlebars with both hands - "Order!" The charm that had long since been enchanted with magic flew by itself out from the charm box on his waist beneath his jacket. It was a protective charm. The protective charm released light as it flew out, erecting a wall using magical energy - a charm flew over, hitting the defensive wall.

The charm that flew over had itself been enchanted with stealth magic, and after the first charm that flew by was blocked, a succession of charms continuously attacked.

The charms hit the protective charm's defensive wall one by one, attacking Kogure with abnormal precision. The defensive wall formed by the protective charm soon showed signs of faltering, but just before a charm managed to break through the defensive wall, Kogure released his hands from the stopped motorcycle.

He drew out the katana on from his waist with the speed of lightning. "Scatter!" With the flash of a sword, he cut down all of the charms together with his own defensive wall. The aura his slash gave off and the violent magical energy released from the blade even frightened Natsume who was behind Kogure's back so much that she trembled.

Kogure cast out a sharp gaze with the katana drawn, staring at the place the charms had flown from. There was a man standing there, on the pedestrian road of the Ginkgo Tunnel.

The man had his long hair tied behind his head, his chin covered by a beard. He wore a military coat, jeans, and boots, and seemed a bit slovenly, but his features

looked stern and dignified, and the expression he looked at Kogure with even held a kind of scholarly, intellectual temperament.

"......Mutobe?" Kogure checked.

The man didn't say a word. Behind him - from the direction of the rugby stadium - came the Nue's roar in place of a reply.

The giant Nue leaped into the night sky from the spectator seats above the rugby stadium, seeming like it only wanted to escape with no intention of fighting. Hokuto and the crow tengu chased after it, so the Nue used its own giant body as a weapon, forcing back the pursuing shikigami, and escaping the shrine outer garden.

All Natsume could do was breathlessly watch the Nue escape the hunting ground.

Chapter 5 - Starting Point

Part 1

...What to do?

Kogure ground his teeth in distress.

The escaping Nue and Mutobe Chihiro. Kogure, who normally made prompt decisions, was rather lost upon encountering this kind of dilemma.

Mutobe was the right-hand man of the Divine General Dairenji Shidou, and the second-in-command of the former Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division, with quite a powerful strength. Though he wouldn't be defeated, it would take some work to win against him. But, if he were delayed he would only be able to watch the Nue escape. If he didn't take the opportunity to deal with the Nue, it was bound to bring about more severe damage.

Maybe he should contact Hirata. No, maybe he should first have the helicopters track the Nue's whereabouts.

But the people on the field were currently completely occupied purifying a phase four spiritual disaster, and he feared that they couldn't fulfill his request quickly.

Kogure had no way of deciding.

Just then--

"Natsume!"

The boy who ran from Aoyama Street shouted towards them.

In the next moment, Natsume briskly jumped off the motorcycle.

"I'll go chase it!"

"Wha- Hey!"

Natsume had already charged towards the boy before he even had time to say something to stop her. Chase? What did they plan on chasing? That didn't need to be said; of course it was the Nue. They planned on chasing the Nue relying only on the strength of two people. Since someone was blocking his own path, then certainly only Natsume was left to continue pursuing the Nue.

About Mutobe..... He didn't need to worry, the attack he had used just now had only targeted him. In addition, in order to keep from harming Natsume in the backseat, there were even a few range-reducing charms deliberately mixed in with the thrown charms. Mutobe was a member of the Twin-Horned Syndicate, and he definitely wouldn't touch Natsume who was rumored to be Yakou's reincarnation.

Kogure gritted his teeth and simultaneously made his decision.

"Alright, damn! Reisen! Hou'oubiden! You chase the Nue, Dasai and Kokuryuu return for now!"

From the perspective of an exorcist, this was a mistaken judgment. Knowing this Kogure still jumped off the motorcycle.

Natsume looked up with bated breath at the Nue escaping the hunting ground.

Just then--

"Natsume!"

Harutora noticed Natsume and the others being attacked and frantically shouted, believing that something bad had happened. She looked at him, noticing that Harutora was charging at her.

Once she heard the voice of her childhood friend and saw his face, Natsume instantly regained her courage and her judgment ability, thinking of the goal for which she was here.

She took action almost reflexively, jumping off the motorcycle, leaving the words "I'll go chase it!", and immediately running towards Harutora. "Wha- Hey!" Kogure hastily called out to stop her, but she still charged forward without even turning back.

She didn't worry about the man called Mutobe Chihiro . She couldn't possibly get attacked if the man and

Kogure confronted each other. She believed that Kogure wouldn't permit such a thing to happen.

When Natsume was running, she shot a glance at Mutobe, and Mutobe also looked at Natsume.

The gazes of the two crossed.

Perhaps this man was the Yakou fanatic who headed this series of events. Natsume originally should have hid out of fear, but strangely, Natsume didn't feel the same loathing as with the Mystical Investigator who had attacked her the previous year.

When the two's gazes crossed, Mutobe showed a smile . That smile was gentle and tender. Not only did it have no intent of attacking, it didn't even have a bit of animosity. Natsume ran past Mutobe, not understanding.

"Hah... Hah...!"

She charged at full speed towards Harutora on the Ginkgo Tunnel - she ran towards the side of her childhood friend shikigami, Harutora.

Just then-- "Wow! Can't tell from the exterior, but you have some pretty good spirit!" A sudden voice sounded,

and it was even Kogure's voice. She jumped in surprise, hurriedly turning around to look, but she only saw a crow tengu that had been flying next to her since an unknown time.

The crow tengu spoke using Kogure's voice: "I'm using the shikigami to go with you. Wait for me to deal with this person and then I'll immediately catch up, got it? Absolutely do not overexert yourselves - that's what he says! My name's Dasai, are we going? Let's go!" Right after Kogure's connection ended, the shikigami instantly called out with a high-pitched voice, and the noise of a motorcycle simultaneously sounded from behind them. She looked back, noticing that a motorcycle with no one on it was approaching her. It seemed that one of the crow tengu was inside the motorcycle, moving the engine.

"Hurry! Jump on."

"Hey, what?"

"JUMP!"[61]

Natsume jumped up without a word and Dasai immediately circled behind her back, lifting her entire self up. "Iyaa!" Natsume couldn't help but cry out, and

the motorcycle slid forward just in time - Dasai let go and Natsume fell down, sitting right on the motorcycle. She was riding the motorcycle before she even noticed.

"Ga! You scream like a girl! Calm down, grip tightly!"

"O.....Okay.....!"

Natsume hastily gripped the motorcycle handlebars - more accurately, she held them and wouldn't let go as the motorcycle's speed accelerated in a flash--

"H-H-H, Harutora-sama!"

"Uwah!"

Pale-faced, Natsume rode the motorcycle that sped closer. Harutora hurriedly stepped back, taken aback.

But, the crow tengu that rapidly approached a step before the motorcycle called out: "Boy! Get on!"

"G, Get on?"

That was rather reckless, wasn't it..... Harutora thought. Kon quickly held Harutora up from behind once she noticed the crow tengu's intentions, holding him in midair - then tossed him into the backseat of the motorcycle. Harutora unconsciously grabbed on to Natsume.

"Aaah! H, Harutora-kun! You're touching--!"

"Oh god! I'm going to die! My life is at risk! I can't do this kind of stunt!"

The motorcycle carrying the two didn't lower its speed at all, rapidly rushing through the Ginkgo Tunnel with no regard for the panicked students and speeding on Aoyama Road. The motorcycle wobbled, sliding as it turned to the right and rubbing tracks on the asphalt road. For the moment, Harutora and Natsume were like riding a roller coaster without safety belts. Natsume gripped the motorcycle and Harutora grabbed on to Natsume for dear life, with Dasai and Kon flying in the air right behind the two of them.

"N-N-Natsume! What exactly is going on?"

"N, Never mind that, your hands - Hyah! H-Harutora-kun, you're--!"

"I'm not doing anything at all! Come to think of it, do you have a motorcycle license?"

"How could I have such a thing!"

Between the master and shikigami's shouts, the motorcycle with Kokuryuu inside it sped at full speed, zooming along the road that Harutora had been on before. It sped south, towards Shibuya.

"A, Anyway, the Nue is the priority! We can't let it escape, let's chase it quickly!"

Natsume raised her voice and shouted. That was right. Harutora worked hard to recompose himself, raising his head.

He looked up to the sky, noticing the Nue and Hokuto who chased doggedly after it above the building to his right, as well as two crow tengu. Dasai, who had also been speeding beside them, also left the motorcycle to join in the assault.

The dragon and the crow tengu attacked consecutively to keep from giving the Nue an opportunity to escape. The Nue suddenly dropped onto the roofs of buildings and suddenly leaped up to shake off the shikigami, constantly repeating similar movements. Though its body was gigantic, the Nue's movements were swift,

very much like a baboon swinging through the trees. Even if 'lag' reactions occasionally appeared on its body, it still didn't show any signs of cowardice.

...How could this.....!

"Kon! Go help Hokuto and the others!"

"A-A-At your command!"

".....Not good, they'll be shaken off no matter what they do!"

"Damn, it would be good if we had a few more people to help!" Harutora and Natsume shouted as they looked up into the night sky.

The Nue went south along Aoyama Road. If it continued to go on, it would reach Shibuya Station. Hokuto, Kon, and the crow tengu kept attacking, doing their utmost to block the giant Nue's progress.

...Damn!

Harutora gritted his teeth. If this went on, wouldn't he have wasted his time desperately rushing over here?

The Nue howled loudly, spreading the miasma it gave off along Aoyama Road. It attacked Natsume and Harutora, and they were only able to bear it and let the miasma cover their bodies.

Then, the chimera lashed out with its tail like a whip, hitting Hokuto who was about to circle in front of the Nue. Hokuto was sent flying out by the blow, crashing onto the road - in front of Harutora and Natsume. The dragon's body flashed intensely because of 'lag'. "Hokuto !" Natsume cried out.

Harutora couldn't help but gasp, since this was his first time seeing Hokuto hit by the enemy, but Hokuto who had taken the attack didn't pay any heed to the injury. It thrashed on the ground, issuing a ferocious growl as if upset, then slammed against the ground, straightened its body, and was about to fly into the sky--

--Like this.....!

"Hold on, Hokuto! Come here!" Harutora inadvertently shouted.

Natsume made a "huh?" sound, turning her head to look at Harutora, but Harutora didn't pay her any heed, just staring straight at Hokuto. Confusion momentarily

flashed across Hokuto's face, but it quickly turned its body as if seeing some clue in Harutora's expression, gliding across the ground and rapidly approaching the motorcycle.

Harutora thought of the feeling of jumping off the motorcycle. That was simply a death-defying stunt, and comparatively, the crow tengus' actions had just been horseplay.

Even so...

Harutora forcefully grabbed onto Natsume's shoulders , standing up on the back of the motorcycle. He pushed off the stunned Natsume, leaping off the motorcycle with a "Bring me up!"

"Harutora-kun!" Natsume's face paled, unable to keep from screaming. Hokuto, who noticed Harutora's intentions, had its spirits suddenly roused, speeding over the road and supporting Harutora's body from below before he collided with the ground.

Harutora grabbed onto a horn on Hokuto's head and Hokuto flew directly into the sky. "I'm going!" After

leaving Natsume with those words, he straddled Hokuto's head - on its neck. Natsume's eyes were frightened round by that sudden action.

The motorcycle and Hokuto rushed down the Aoyama Sanchome crossroad. Hokuto increased its speed and flew up in a flash, and this time finally succeeded in circling in front of the Nue. The wind pressure was strong, and Harutora clenched his teeth bitterly, reaching his hand into the charm box on his waist.

"Order!"

He threw out a charm - a water element charm. Magical energy created a mass of water and formed a torrent, directly hitting the Nue's head. The Nue roared angrily, stopped, and turned around.

"Wh-Why have you showed up here? Harutora-sama!"

"Kon! Don't mind me, keep attacking the Nue!"

Harutora barked at his shocked and apprehensive shikigami, continuing to throw charms and doing all he could to impede the Nue's progress.

"Ga! Incredible! Too reckless! But so cool!"

"So cool! We can't lose!"

"How exciting! Don't wait for the guy Zenjirou! We'll deal with this Nue!"

The crow tengu were driven on by Harutora's wild actions, swirling into a storm and disrupting the Nue's vision while successively hurling magical energy at the Nue. In addition, Harutora only noticed when he entered the sky that the crow tengus' cries seemed to be a form of magic itself. As they cawed, the sound gradually penetrated and eroded the Nue's sense of balance.

Harutora and the others didn't fall behind either. Kon used her foxfire to divert the Nue's attention, and Harutora took the opportunity to attack with a charm. Bursts of noise sequentially pierced through the Nue's entire body.

The Nue roared angrily, the roar filled with miasma and magical energy, but - Harutora had long since gotten used to it. He was no longer scared, instead roaring: " Don't think that'll work!" and infusing his magical energy into charms, attacking randomly. His strong spiritual

power was his only weapon, and he relied on this spiritual power, indiscriminately and desperately throwing charms.

The Nue that had been single-mindedly escaping finally counterattacked under this heavy onslaught. It raked its claws, attacking Hokuto underneath Harutora's feet.

"Don't even try - Order!"

Harutora simultaneously threw out three protective charms and three defensive walls were temporarily erected, blocking the Nue's movements in midair. The Nue couldn't help but roar angrily, reaching out its claws and trying to forcefully tear open the obstructing defensive walls, utterly discomfited. But, that movement just happened to make a weak point appear in its movements.

This stupid thing - Hokuto's eyes shone and it immediately lunged towards the Nue, its movements like a fierce snake and its prey. Due to its shocking speed, Harutora who sat on its neck was immediately thrown into midair because of inertia.

"--!"

Above the roof of a building, a kind of floaty and bloodcurdling feeling assaulted Harutora, who had momentarily lost his balance. Before his eyes, Hokuto bit into the giant Nue's throat. The Nue's shriek became a turbulent shockwave, violently battering Harutora who was in midair.

"Harutora-kun!"

Natsume screamed in shock. Oops - Hokuto hurriedly reached out its hind leg, nimbly grabbing Harutora who had almost fallen down. Harutora's whole body was frozen and he couldn't even cry out. But the moment Hokuto's consciousness turned towards its rear, the Nue violently slammed its fist into Hokuto's face, escaping the dragon's fangs.

Intense interference appeared over the bodies of the Nue and Hokuto, but the Nue's was the most severe. The Nue directly dropped onto the roof of a building, its gigantic body flickering intensely and miasma spurting in large amounts out of Hokuto's bite wound like fresh blood. Though Hokuto had also been injured, it refused to show a weak appearance, roaring angrily at the Nue.

"This is a good opportunity! Let's take advantage of it!"

"Take advantage of it! Reisen! Hou'oubiden! Give this thing the finishing blow!"

"Understood!"

The three crow tengu took the moment to attack, their spiritual pressure adding to each other and gradually rising.

"S-S-S-Scoundrel! Look at what you are doing!"

At the same time, Kon flew towards Hokuto, angrily scolding it. Hokuto frowned as if reproaching her for getting upset over a little thing, then twisted its body, letting Harutora sit back on its head.

Harutora quickly grabbed on to Hokuto's horn, then abruptly shook his head.

"...Kon, what are you doing!"

"Huh? I, I....."

"Can you understand orders? Don't mind me, hurry up and attack the Nue!" Harutora roared, quickly drawing out a new charm.

"Right now is a good opportunity! Hokuto too, attack all-out with the pace from before!'

Actually, he couldn't stop his limbs from trembling, but that kind of thing wasn't important at all right now, and the priority was to deal with the Nue before them as soon as possible.

As Harutora said this, Hokuto immediately lunged towards the Nue again with a frightening momentum, but Kon only hesitated with a naive expression.

"......As you command....." However, she still obeyed Harutora's order, returning to the attack. As things were now, the culprit endangering her master was the thing that had to be eliminated the most.

Harutora and the others attacked, and the battle became even more intense.

The Nue jumped towards the wall from the roof of the building and then jumped down, moving while avoiding attacks. Since Hokuto's strike had succeeded, the Nue was unable to counterattack or even forcibly break through Harutora and the others' enclosure.

Not long after, they moved to a crossroads - above the Omotesando Subway Station. The Nue was pursued for the whole way and finally stopped in the center of the crossroads.

"Okay! Everyone, go!"

Dasai ordered, and Hokuto, Reisen, Hou'oubiden, Kon , and Harutora swarmed the Nue, focusing their magic into attacks and unleashing an onslaught from above the Nue's head. The Nue, which used all of its power to defend, leaped away again.

Intense interference appeared on the Nue's body, and its giant body twisted and deformed.

Since they couldn't let it continue to go deeper into the city, right now was the time of reckoning, as if they didn't deal with it as quickly as possible before the wound Hokuto had made healed, they would end up just watching it escape. With a consciousness that could collapse at any time, Harutora converted his spiritual power into magical energy, infusing it into the charms and throwing them to strike the Nue.

However, the Nue endured these attacks. It was wounded and became weak, but it still vigorously moved its huge body, destroying Harutora and the others' enclosure in one leap. "Damn!" Harutora cursed, and Hokuto angrily pursued it.

In that moment--

"Harutora!"

He heard the call of his good friend.

Part 2

He had forgotten when this event was. At the time, he had been feeling an intolerable anxiety.

"Yo, it's been a long time, Touji. Anyway, you must be bored, right?"

Touji had once beaten up Harutora, who had come to the hospital room to visit him, without any explanation. Moreover, it hadn't just been a punch. He had hit again and again, kicking and trampling, venting all of the dark

emotions in his heart on to Harutora. Harutora obviously hadn't just sat back and let himself get beaten, but resisting was a waste of energy. The Touji at that time had been changed into a living spirit, and he really wasn't an opponent Harutora could compare to.

Finally, the staff of the facility had rushed to the hospital room and restrained Touji. Harutora could only blame himself for choosing the wrong time to visit, as he had been exceptionally unlucky even before then.

Touji didn't have any thoughts of regret, and he even felt refreshed. The main physician's fortunate son seemed to him like an eyesore, and he couldn't bear the way Harutora looked at him, a look that seemed to disdain him. That day the seal was strengthened, and Touji laughed for the entire night, crying and laughing at his own misfortune.

But the next morning, when he was burnt out, Harutora walked into the hospital room alone.

"I've come to return the favor." Touji didn't fight back, despite being pummeled by Harutora. He wasn't hurt or angry, just extremely shocked.

Harutora, whose wounds from the previous day hadn't yet healed, looked down at him with swelling cheeks, sitting on the ground. A slight smile emerged on the face of Touji who looked blankly at him.

"What's wrong, living spirit? Where did your boldness from yesterday go?"

Touji was speechless. Only then did he notice that something hot was sliding down his swelling cheek.

Harutora breathed out, kneeling down to look Touji eye to eye.

"The two of us should get along fine." Those words deeply pierced Touji's empty and vague heart--

Even now, they showed no signs of pulling out.

Yukikaze carried Touji, galloping ten meters above the ground.

It passed over the walls of buildings, kicked off the branches of trees, and surged along the shortest path. Touji single-mindedly stared ahead, the violent wind whipping up his hair.

Pain.

His forehead felt pained, as well as his canines. As his emotions became excited, the influence of the oni inside his body gradually swelled. He knew that horns had sprouted from his forehead and that fangs had grown from his mouth. He was very clear, but he wasn't afraid.

He was the linchpin. As long as he firmly held on to Ato Touji, he didn't need to be afraid of the oni's existence.

A living spirit.

Accept it, he thought.

Recognize himself who had become a living spirit, then accept it and trust in it. I am me, he thought silently.

How shameful - he couldn't help but mock himself. He had taken his circumstances as amnesty and oppressed the people around him, indulging in pleasure brought by violence while feeling empty, and finally was even possessed by the oni, endangering lives, even pushing aside the one who had reached out to him.

Shameful. Despicable. Stupid. Unredeemable.

But even if he were like that, there was still a group of good friends who didn't give up on him, who were still willing to lend a hand even if he refused them with spite. Therefore, he couldn't run away anymore. Now was time for him to face it, accept it, and move forward. The time to screw around darkly while hating himself was over, and it was time to struggle towards the source of light and advance with the companions who had let him decide this.

...Don't be afraid.

He didn't need to fear the oni. He still had his life and his future.

He didn't need to fear or run away. Only facing the problem would resolve it.

Horns and fangs grew from his face, demonic aura hovering around his entire body. The oni put on the armor by itself, casting the figure of a samurai over Touji's uniform.

But, it was no problem. Ato Touji still tightly grasped the reins controlling the oni.

They charged straight towards Aoyama Road, Yukikaze dashing between the buildings that stood in great numbers on either side of the road. Touji's change didn't cause it to fear at all, but it was no wonder, as after all, Touji didn't know - Yukikaze had long since gotten used to running here and there while carrying a living spirit.

Hooves trampled through the night sky and Touji advanced along with Yukikaze. The scenery around them sped past like an arrow. Their target was the Nue and the companions that should be battling the Nue right now.

Suddenly, a sharp light flashed in Touji's eyes.

A giant presence of a spiritual disaster appeared ahead . Yukikaze also noticed, raising its front leg and neighing. Touji pulled the reins tight, tossing them hard.

"Over there! Go!"

Yukikaze ran through the night sky, dashing past the south Aoyama Gochome crossroad - a mobile spiritual disaster over twenty meters in total appeared before them. A phase three, a Nue. Circling around it were figures that seemed like crows, and..... Hokuto.

In addition--

"Ha."

Touji inadvertently laughed, a smile spilling from his heart over to his lips.

There was a figure on Hokuto's head, straddling the dragon's neck. There was only one person who was this impulsive among the people that Touji knew.

The presence of the imminent battle made the oni inside his body unbearably excited, and Touji had the

same feeling. He resonated with the oni, his appearance ferocious, and aura pulsing from his body like lava - demonic aura spewed from the depths of his body.

He gripped the shakujou Tenma had entrusted to him in reverse, intense interference appearing all over his body, the oni's helmet appearing on his face. The oni caused bursts of pain. It's all right, Touji smiled.

...I'll bring you some prey now.

Eat as much as you want.

"Ha.....!"

His eyes flashed, showing fangs, and his oni-like appearance gripped the shakujou, then raised it high like he was throwing a spear, using all his strength - turning his own aura and demonic aura into magical energy, infusing it into the shakujou. The shakujou hummed, giving off light, its strength increasing until it almost burst.

The demon inside Touji's body entered the shakujou.

He aimed at the target--

"Harutora!"

Touji focused his mind, powerfully throwing the shakujou out.

Upon hearing that call, Harutora quickly turned his gaze towards the rear of the Nue.

There was a figure ahead in midair, a figure riding on a horse. He couldn't help but doubt his own eyes, as that horse was Yukikaze, and the person sitting on Yukikaze was none other than Touji. Touji threw something at him, a thin - spear, no, a shakujou. That was the shakujou that Ohtomo had specially made for him.

Harutora's mind was completely befuddled. Why had Touji appeared here? Why had Yukikaze appeared here? Why did he have the shakujou in his hands? Why, why, why.....

Harutora immediately tossed those doubts out of his mind.

The shakujou immediately shot towards the Nue's giant body as if it were guided.

Unfortunately, the Nue noticed the shakujou flying from behind it in the nick of time and the frightening strength infused into the shakujou. It roared and forcefully twisted its body, kicking in midair, and bending to avoid the attack. The shakujou flitted over the Nue's head without hitting.

It was so close.

No, that was wrong.

Harutora had certainly grasped the meaning of Touji's shout.

"Hokuto!"

Hokuto simultaneously and correctly understood Harutora's intent. It twisted its body, charging in the direction the Nue had dodged, speeding like an arrow along the path that the shakujou had been thrown in.

"Hah!" Harutora reached his hand out towards the shakujou that rapidly flew by, grabbing it tightly, and received the shakujou that Touji had sent over.

Once he grabbed the shakujou, Harutora's fingers were almost ripped off. There was a fierce and wild strength infused into the shakujou. But he firmly held on to it, accepting Touji's intent with all his power. He grabbed it and brought it under control.

At this moment, the results of his unremitting hard work over the half year from the autumn day last year until now were displayed. If his Onmyou Academy teachers were here, they would definitely stare with wide eyes in disbelief. He managed to finally control the shakujou's strength.

The strength overflowing from the shakujou flowed into the rings on the front end and the rings spun like rotors, the magical energy forming an edge - a giant blade.

No, it wasn't fitting to call this a blade. This was a fang , one that cut, pierced, tore, and bit. A vicious fang with a powerful strength.

Hokuto extended its body, rapidly flying into the air and blocking the space above the Nue's head. The Nue looked at them, its round eyes unable to conceal its cowardice, and it hurriedly stooped its head.

"Eat this!"

Harutora swung the shakujou, piercing deep into the Nue's neck. The strength infused into the shakujou exploded inside the Nue's body, the oni's strength dispersing in all directions and tearing apart the Nue's body from the inside. Hokuto noticed the danger, quickly pulling back, and Harutora also quickly let go, leaving the shakujou in the Nue.

The Nue fell into the center of the crossroads again, without the strength to even defend. Violent interference assaulted the giant body like a shikigami whose vessel had been destroyed. Every time its body flashed, miasma scattered everywhere.

The aura forming the spiritual disaster gradually crumbled.

But-- "......Damn, it's still not enough?" The Nue still hadn't been completely routed. The wounded, dying monster tried desperately to fight, allowing the shakujou to stick in its body. It pushed its head up, threatening Harutora and the others who surrounded it.

But, just then.

A shining charm danced neatly through the air, and colorful light encircled the Nue, forming a beautiful nimbus. The brilliant charm gave off a mind-blowing magical energy, overflowing into the surroundings like a fragrance.

Of course, this wasn't magic that Harutora had cast, and it had nothing to do with Touji or the group of shikigami either.

「――奇をごちたに、に、奇――[62]

Natsume.

At some point, the motorcycle had stopped and Kokuryuu was flapping his wings by the side, flying in the air. Natsume sat on the stopped motorcycle, her eyes closed, focusing her mind and chanting an incantation.

The aura pervading her body carried an elegant radiance, dying the girl in gorgeous colors. Her black hair that was tied with a ribbon floated in the air, and the charms stacked in her right hand flew out one by one like butterflies, entering the nimbus surrounding the Nue.

When the final charm had flown into the nimbus Natsume suddenly opened her eyes, forming a blade seal with her hands and raising them above her head.

"In the name of Amenominakanushi[63], sweep away this evil miasma! Order!"

The blade seal swung up with a ferocious momentum. This was the strongest purification magic among those that Tsuchimikado Natsume had studied - the 'Perfect God's Curse'.

Magical energy shot through the charms strung up in the nimbus, then burst towards the interior, forming billowing beams of light. Not only Harutora but also Hokuto, Kon, the crow tengu, and even Touji and Yukikaze who were farther off, inadvertently closed their eyes because of the blinding light. Magical energy spilled forth like a melody and a pure, bright aura covered the surroundings. A brilliant and ethereal melody spilled forth and dominated everything. Harutora felt it over his whole body, and even his soul became intoxicated from the magic's strength.

A bright whiteness.

"......Uh....." Not knowing exactly how long had passed , as his sense of time was numb, Harutora slowly opened his eyes.

His eyes that had been blinded because of the glare slowly adjusted to the scene before them. In front of him was the horn on Hokuto's head as well as the scenery of the night, with the deserted, empty crossroads under them.

The Nue had vanished.

The shakujou that had pierced the Nue floated above the crossroads, then fell onto the ground before Harutora's eyes after it felt gravity's pull. It seemed that there was still some extra strength left inside the shakujou, as with a metallic sound, the shakujou stood spiritedly on the asphalt road, as if showing off its own accomplishment.

"......The purification..... Did it succeed.....?" Harutora breathed, asking in a stiff voice.

"Ga! Well done!"

"Nue eliminated!"

The crow tengu called out together, cawing and happily jumping around in a dance. Hokuto snorted when it saw that, raising its head and straightening its chest. Stunned, Harutora slid down Hokuto's body down to its back. "......Did we deal with it?" He murmured, his mind blank. But just as he finished speaking--

"......Kon! Hurry up and catch Harutora!" Natsume on the motorcycle hurriedly shouted, leaning on the handlebars.

Immediately after, Hokuto vanished.

Since she had used a strong magic that she still wasn't familiar with, Natsume's spiritual power seemed to have already reached its limit and she couldn't continue maintaining Hokuto's materialization.

"Uwah!" Harutora momentarily lost his balance, falling downwards again. Kon hastily flew forward, catching her master's right arm. Harutora grabbed on to Kon's waist, finally stabilizing himself. Not only did none of the crow tengu come forward to help when they saw that scene, they even all laughed so hard they shook.

Harutora slowly descended together with Kon. The more he approached the ground, the more he felt like the spiritual disaster had truly been purified.

".....Great." He couldn't help but grin.

".....I really came at the right time."

"Touji? And..... Yukikaze!"

Yukikaze casually descended, carrying Touji. It stopped by Harutora, and only then did Harutora regain the shock that he had thrown out of his mind earlier.

"Why are you here? Never mind Touji, isn't Yukikaze the family's-- Ah, Touji! Your horns!"

The twin horns on Touji's forehead made Harutora's eyes widen for a moment. Looking carefully, he could even see lingering traces of the oni's armor on him.

The demon transformation had progressed further.

But, the expression that emerged on Touji's face wasn't the oni's, but was without a question the expression that he normally saw on his good friend's face.

"Isn't it cool?" Touji grinned, that arrogant and frivolous response exactly same as the normal Touji.

Harutora didn't really get what had happened, as his mind was still overloaded from the intense battle that had just ended. Though he was confused, he didn't have a bit of anxiety or fear, and instead, he was at ease for some reason. He simply believed that this friend had overcome a storm.

"......Yeah, it's not bad." Harutora spoke seriously while staring at Touji, the same mocking smile as his good friend's emerging on his mouth. "There's nothing more fitting for you than that egotistic appearance."

Part 3

"......Tch, to think they dealt with it....."

On Aoyama Road, above the bridge from the south Aoyama Sanchome crossroad leading to the Omotesando Station, Kagami muttered a curse.

Though he cursed, his expression was very joyous and he leaned his body on the railing, his eyes staring

intently in the direction of Omotesando Station - towards Harutora and the others who had purified the Nue.

The purification carried out in the Meiji outer garden had already ended. Kagami had recognized the situation and left the area beforehand alone. He announced that he was going ahead to chase the escaped '02', but actually he was interested in Tsuchimikado Natsume - more accurately, the group of Onmyou Academy students with him as the head that he had encountered in the evening.

But, it actually wasn't correct to say he was 'interested'. With his peculiar sense of smell, Kagami had sniffed out that instead of dealing with '01', whose redeeming trait was its size, and participating in that large-scale spiritual disaster purification similar to that of sport events, this side was surely more interesting.

His intuition proved correct. Outsiders were in charge of purifying a phase three spiritual disaster. Though Kogure's shikigami were assisting on the side, it was still a rare scene.

If this incident got out, the rumors that Tsuchimikado Natsume was Yakou's reincarnation would definitely

gain credibility and they would spread like wildfire. The Twin-Horned Syndicate had planned this series of spiritual disasters, but they might jump for joy more excitedly when the Nue were completely wiped out. It was ironic.

"Alright..... What should I do?" Kagami leaned on the railing, muttering and laughing coldly.

The Exorcist Bureau was using all its power to purify a spiritual disaster and didn't have anyone to supervise Kagami's every move. Because of this, no one would be the wiser even if he 'intervened' from the shadows. He wouldn't make that kind of mistake. Moreover, the person who made him feel the most interest right now wasn't Tsuchimikado Natsume, but rather the student who had become a living spirit - Touji.

Before the operation had started, Kagami had accessed the records from two years ago. Touji had indeed been involved in the spiritual disaster Dairenji Shidou had brought about and had even directly come in contact with Dairenji who had become a phase four. In other words, he had been assaulted by the spiritual pressure and miasma of a phase four 'Type-Ogre' spiritual disaster and almost become a spiritual disaster.

The 'Type-Ogre' spiritual disaster Dairenji Shidou had used himself as the core for hadn't been a simple spiritual disaster. No, the situation hadn't been simple at all.

"......Unfortunately, the information was all destroyed.....

There was nothing in the world that could escape Kagami's sharp eyes, including the 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka. Kagami and her had met a few times, and he had seen that she was a 'vessel' in a single glance. Her ability as a Divine General - the surprising ability that she wielded at such a young age - was at best just an additional effect.

Dairenji Shidou had made his own daughter into a ' vessel'. But why had he done this? Of course, this was in order to let some kind of spiritual being possess her. Dairenji had made his own daughter into a 'receptacle' to receive spirits, rearing and cultivating her for that purpose.

But when Dairenji brought about the spiritual disaster two years ago, he had become the core instead of his daughter. Not only Kagami, but also all the Mystical Investigators couldn't find the reason behind it.

Since Dairenji had 'prepared' a vessel like his daughter , it was hard to think of him as a normal spiritual disaster after he became a 'Type-Ogre'. A phase three spiritual disaster - a mobile spiritual disaster - actually meant a ' materialized spiritual being'. In other words, the most suitable explanation was that Dairenji had made himself into a vessel for possession, which led to spiritual disaster transformation as a result - a demon transformation.

Then Dairenji Shidou - as the previous head of the Lingering Spirit Division and the cadre of the Twin-Horned Syndicate, what exactly had he planned on letting possess his body?

And what exactly had attached itself to his body as a result?

Dairenji who had transformed into a spiritual disaster had been purified by the Exorcist Bureau, which caused the Lingering Spirit Division that was the lair of the Twin-Horned Syndicate to fall under inspection. The Mystical Investigators had carried out a thorough investigation, but unfortunately not a single definite fact had been dug up, and right now they were only left with intractable questions.

But, what if someone had been affected by Dairenji Shidou and had become a living spirit? Would the demon inside that living spirit's body just be an ordinary demon?

".....Interesting, it's way too interesting....."

The answer was hard to figure out, but he could find the truth by opening the lid, and that container holding the answer was right in front of him, in front of him who was unattended.

".....But, it would save a lot of trouble if he fell to the path of the demon....." He murmured, stepping back from the railing, an unkind smile emerging on his lips. But, that smile didn't last very long and vanished in the blink of an eye.

Knock--

The sound of wood lightly knocking against the cement..... Footsteps sounded from behind him. His heart leaped, and something hard immediately pressed against his back.

".....You're the same as always."

A hearty and passionate Kansai accent. But Kagami could hear the ice-cold chill hidden beneath the calm tone.

"I taught you to always be on your guard on the very first day. You really aren't suited to be a Mystical Investigator, I really made the right choice in guiding you to become an exorcist."

Ohtomo pressed the short cane in his hand against Kagami's back, speaking leisurely. His tone was regulated as if he were pressurizing an egg grasped tight in his hand, yet afraid of crushing it.

Kagami's lips rose, showing an unruly smile. Though it was sharp as a blade, the smile was filled with tension. He couldn't turn around, his entire body taut.

".....Well, well. Isn't this Ohtomo-senpai?"

"It's been a long time, Kagami-kun."

The two of them greeted each other, seeming friendly, but their words actually hid blades. Kagami felt like someone behind his back was holding him at gunpoint, ordering him to raise his hands high, and he was extremely clear that the current situation was as dangerous as that analogy.

".....Why are you in this kind of place? I heard you retired, could you have come to visit?"

"How's that possible, it's no place for me to take the stage right now. I was just on a nighttime walk. That's a recent hobby of mine."

"It's those old man hobbies again. You haven't changed at all, senpai."

"You're just like old days too. You don't seem civil at all, you're just a punk."

The two of them smiled, but greeted each other with veiled words.

"You're so shrewd that you would realize right away even if I didn't tell you, but I'll tell you first. I'm a teacher right now." Ohtomo continued speaking.

"A teacher?"

"That's right, I'm a teacher at the Onmyou Academy."

Kagami's body went rigid and he glanced towards Harutora and the others.

"......Ha, I see....." He murmured while grinding his teeth: "How unexpected..... to think senpai would switch to becoming a teacher."

"Even I myself didn't expect it. But being a teacher is actually pretty interesting, and I noticed that I'm extremely used to dealing with problem children. It's not easy to find someone more difficult than Kagami Reiji."

"How hurtful, and I thought we got along very well."

"That's true, I really miss those days."

Saying this, Ohtomo snorted, and a deeply abhorrent mocking smile emerged on Kagami's lips.

"Alright." Ohtomo spoke:

"I finally ran into you, but I don't have any intention of keeping a busy official Independent Exorcist tied up in this place. Let me take my leave first."

"That's truly regretful, I wanted to chat for a bit longer. ..... Right, I'll come to the Onmyou Academy some day to stir things up. There's a student who interests me a lot."

Kagami deliberately spoke those provocative words, and Ohtomo only laughed coldly and quietly upon hearing.

"I don't think that will be so easy. You'll have to spend a long time just to undo the curses, so you'll be staying here for a while."

"What did you say!" After Ohtomo uttered those words, Kagami showed anger for the first time, turning around to look at Ohtomo.

Ohtomo grinned in satisfaction, showing a cold gaze.

"You're a bit too careless. Who knows how many curses I laid during the time you and I were chatting. Let me warn you out of goodwill that none of them are common curses. They're all strange curses no one knows about that you won't find the names of unless you check some ancient books. But don't worry, I set an ample period of time, so you have some time to investigate slowly."

"......Don't think you can scare me like that." Kagami immediately replied. The leisure from before wasn't audible in his tone, and it was full of boiling rage instead. "We've known each other for so long, do you think I'd believe that prized silver tongue of yours?"

"Hahaha, those are some really interesting words. But, don't waste your breath. In any case, you also understand what kind of person I am. Do you understand why I brought you to so many tragic battlefields when you were under my care? It was for

you to realize that I'm a person who will do anything if there's a reason to."

"....." Kagami gritted his teeth ferociously.

Ohtomo spoke the truth. Back when Kagami had entered the Onmyou Agency, his ability had obtained approval, but his style and personality were believed to be problematic, and the higher-ups decided that Ohtomo would bring Kagami around for practical training.

At the time, Ohtomo had been the 'Shadow' of the Mystical Investigators, the capable confidant of the ' Sacred Fan' Amami Daizen. He dealt with the Onmyou Agency's work that didn't see the light and definitely couldn't be made public, belonging to the darkness of the magic community. Kagami had witnessed first-hand the contents of Ohtomo's work during his practical training.

No, more accurately, it should be said that Ohtomo had 'deliberately' let him witness those scenes.

Controlling the opponent's knowledge was the basis of second-class magic, and its essence was to use the ' unknown' to its fullest.

"Like I said just now, you're very shrewd. Even if my words are ninety percent bluff, you cannot ignore the last ten percent, definitely not. Alright, why don't you go spend some time slowly researching until you're completely sure that my words were all complete nonsense."

Ohtomo forcefully twisted the short staff pressed into Kagami's back like he couldn't wait to damage his flesh.

"Remember, don't even think about touching those students while I'm still alive."

Those words were like hot mercury. Though they were dull, they carried a breathtaking valor.

Kagami was speechless for a while. He accepted that he had indeed been gotten the best of, and just as Ohtomo had evaluated, he didn't refuse to accept defeat so much to the point of risking death.

"......Some day....." He barely held back the anger, hate, and anxiety that erupted like a volcano, gritting his teeth forcefully and saying: "Some day, I'll defeat you... I just can't wait for that day....."

"Oh my, that's quite scary. I could smooth things over and have you die here in an unexpected accident, want to try?"

"......I'll definitely kill you."

"Hah, we've definitely both got 'silver tongues'."

Ohtomo laughed. He knew that the killing intent in Kagami's voice was a deliberate provocation. He was still the same verbally abusing Kagami as always.

On the other hand, Kagami was overjoyed. This was different, that living spirit and reincarnated brat were no match. Only jokes involving life and death and the aberrant games of adults could let him enjoy this kind of ecstatic feeling.

"......Why don't you stop there, Jin."

Kagami looked to the right in surprise upon hearing those words, noticing that Kogure who had walked up at some point was already standing on the other end of the bridge. Ohtomo leisurely made a sound different from Kagami's shock.

Kagami pressed his lips together again.

Whatever situation he was in, he would always be on his guard. Even in this kind of situation, Ohtomo had long since noticed Kogure walked over here. Vexation inadvertently spilled forth in Kagami's heart, not the same as anger or loathing. He was mad that he hadn't noticed earlier.

Ohtomo frowned towards his old classmate.

"Hey you, you're too reckless, Zenjirou! Why did you let my students run out to directly deal with a Nue? I was so surprised when I ran out to look. What's the Exorcist Bureau making underage outsiders do?"

"I, I didn't want to, things happened suddenly. Mutobe of the Twin-Horned Syndicate tied me up, and I only got out just now."

"What kind of stupid reason is that, you idiot! You should have developed countermeasures for Mutobe from the beginning, the Exorcist Bureau should be responsible for that. The chief's post might be in danger if I revealed this to the media."

"Bastard! Don't make that kind of bad joke! This isn't funny!"

Maybe believing that Ohtomo might actually do such a thing, Kogure's expression changed. It was really a farce. Kagami couldn't help but click his tongue.

".....Kogure-san, did you successfully arrest Mutobe?"

"Of course..... well, I really want to say that." Upon hearing Kagami's question, Kogure couldn't help but make a bitter face, grudgingly saying: ".....He's dead."

"What?"

"Uwah, how bad, how did you let him die, Zenjirou?"

"What a pity, our most important main suspect died again. It looks like we'll still have to play around for a while."

"This clumsy man, really....."

"Was he always like this?"

"He was always like this."

"Sh, Shut up! He had a suicide curse placed on him since the beginning, what could I do! And also, you two are normally always arguing so loudly, so why are you

so understanding when you're talking bad about me! That's a bit strange!"

Ohtomo and Kagami took turns continuously ridiculing him and Kogure's face flushed in anger as he protested repeatedly. From the contents of the conversation, it was hard to imagine that they were National First-Class Onmyouji - the premier practitioners in the nation.

"Ah, found Zenjirou! Zenjirou's over here!"

"You definitely won't believe it! They purified the Nue! Incredible, right? They did it, amazing!"

The four crow tengu - Kogure's shikigami - flew towards the bridge one after another. Ohtomo casually put down the short staff. Kagami had managed to obtain release from the magic binds - the force of second-class magic - but he still felt unbearably fretful in his chest.

This farce truly got worse and worse. Kagami cooperated with the performance while holding back his anger. Since Kogure had come, he would have to be careful for now and could only wait quietly for the next opportunity to have some fun. After the spiritual disaster was purified, in a while he would have to go out to deal

with some annoying and downright boring aftermath work.

But, he had clearly learned the location of Yakou's reincarnation, the living spirit related to Dairenji, and Ohtomo.

The Onmyou Academy.

He didn't want to give up on the prey that was so fascinating. Though he hated being patient from the bottom of his heart, as long as there was a need, he had the ability to endure various difficulties or hardships. He would wait in the wings and kill his rivals by surprise, whether it was the Exorcist Bureau, the Onmyou Agency, or Ohtomo. Kagami carved this point into his heart.

But - he didn't expect that something fun would happen before he returned to his boring job.

Suddenly - "Tch." Ohtomo looked over, then a chill went through Kogure's entire body. Then, Kagami also noticed that 'presence'.

The three National First-Class Onmyoujis' expressions changed as they looked in the distance. The crow tengu didn't understand what had happened, and also followed their gazes over.

Looking in the direction of Harutora and the others.

Part 4

In the scene of the purified Nue spiritual disaster, Harutora sat on the road alone, exhausted.

Next to him was Touji who had dismounted from Yukikaze. The horns and fangs on his face had already returned to their original state. After landing, Kon walked around here and there, seeming to be scouting the spiritual disaster area. Kogure's crow tengu gave the work of maintaining the condition of the area to Harutora and the others, flying out to find their master to report.

Natsume didn't stay by Harutora and Touji's side, still sitting on the motorcycle in the distance. When she had received Yukikaze's charm from Touji, she had

unhesitatingly asked for the reason why Yukikaze had appeared here. "My father....." She murmured several words but didn't open her mouth again, her expression seeming quite complex. Concerned about her mood, Harutora and Touji both happened to move away from her.

No one present opened their mouth to say a word, and the area became quite tranquil after the noisy crow tengu left. After completing this matter, they didn't even have the strength to rejoice. Touji who had come here in the end wasn't as bad, but Harutora and Natsume were already so tired that they were limp and powerless.

Harutora sat on the ground, supporting himself from behind with his two hands. "Come to think of it..." He spoke with a wry smile: "The day's finally over." Those words seemed like the final conclusion to this day. Touji replied, also with somewhat of a wry smile: "That's right. "

So many things had happened one after another during the period of time from the start of the practical examination until now, though it actually hadn't even

been half a day. Moreover, every single event had been important and serious. Their feelings inevitably felt a bit confused and they had a hard time calming down.

Today in the morning, Harutora had only been worried about whether he could successfully advance a grade. Though he had knowledge relating to shocking situations like spiritual disasters, Divine Generals, and development into phase threes - because he was in the Onmyou Academy and knew about these matters because he belonged to the magic community - in the end , they still had had nothing to do with his daily life.

The incident that had happened to Touji was the same. Though he had been worried at the start when he heard about the exam contents, he hadn't seriously worried that Touji would show signs of demon transformation again. That showed how much he trusted the adults around him - his father who was the primary physician caring for Touji, the proctoring teachers of the practical exam, and the Onmyou Academy that he belonged to. He had been confident that no matter what happened, those adults would come forward and guard their daily lives to ensure they weren't destroyed.

But, after this day, Harutora truly realized that he was wrong.

It wasn't that adults weren't willing to protect, but they could only do what they could.

Things had happened that even the teachers in the practical examinations couldn't handle. Even the Onmyou Academy couldn't completely protect the students. Even the Exorcist Bureau, though they had finally purified the spiritual disaster, had caused severe damage. Even the Onmyou Agency's trump card, the Divine Generals, weren't omnipotent superhumans, and there were little girls like Suzuka among them along with hateful people like Kagami.

Harutora trusted that the adults would protect him in the end, and had never believed that was a mistaken thought. In particular, the figure of the practical teachers who had stepped forward for them were burned into his heart.

But on the other hand, he also understood something. Fanatically believing in the adults around him and blindly giving everything to them to deal with wasn't called 'trust', but rather 'dependence'. He had learned to

first rely on 'himself' before relying on the assistance of adults. He would rely on his own strength and his mustered efforts..... If that kind of hard work wasn't enough to resolve the problem, he trusted that the people around him would come forward to help. That was true confidence, or perhaps could be called 'faith'.

".....I have to do my best....."

After defeating the Nue, he hadn't thought that these kinds of ideas would appear in his mind. The path to becoming an Onmyouji seemed to be longer and more tiring than he had imagined. No, it shouldn't just be the path of an Onmyouji, growing up and maturing was definitely also an arduous process.

".....I really never thought you could control the oni..... How is it? Touji? No problems?"

Harutora sat on the ground looking up at Touji next to him. He feigned calmness on the outside, but he couldn't conceal the wavering and tension deep in his heart. After all, he had just fought with Touji who had almost turned into a demon, and thought that while Touji was fine on the outside, there must be some trauma left in his heart.

"I'm not sure." But, Touji's attitude was no different from usual, and his mouth smirked like always. "Just now was only 'practice', I still can't say for sure."

"……It seems scary. Both a former juvenile delinquent and a demon. That's not just a bad dream, that's a nightmare."[64]

"Be careful what you say, Harutora. On the off chance that I do become a demon, it's very possible that you'll be the first one to be eaten and chewed up in a bite."

Touji deliberately showed his canines, grinning and relieving the remaining doubt in Harutora's heart. Harutora had reconfirmed that Touji was a trustworthy person.

"Next time, I'll send you a tiger loincloth[65] so you can wear it instead of that bandanna."

"Hmph, your head's so big after defeating a single Nue . Don't forget whose power was inside that shakujou."

"You don't know how hard I had it before then, you only came out when things were almost done with. To think you're still proudly taking credit."

"Because my unfortunate self was beaten up by a certain person, but I still rushed out here so worriedly. That kind of situation is very rare, you know."

The two of them bantered, glancing at each other. Harutora's expression relaxed first.

"You really had it hard too."

"Honestly, I'm confident that my luck's even worse than yours. But--" Touji's face suddenly went serious. " You and I are the same, we seem to always turn the tables in a crisis. When I encountered the demon and became a living spirit, your dad rescued me, and that's why I can stand here like this today. You could call all of it a blessing in disguise."

"A blessing in disguise? What's that mean?"

Seeing Harutora's confused look, Touji smiled wryly. " Bakatora."

"I encountered the demon, but also met you guys. With that, I'm already satisfied." Touji managed to speak with a youthful, sincere tone. Harutora blinked in surprise, looking up at his good friend, then smiled evilly .

"Huh? What's wrong with you, Touji? Haven't you used up your lifetime's worth of 'youth' tonight?"

"......That's true. Pretend I didn't say that just now." Touji mocked himself bashfully, turning away.

Harutora hastily grasped the opportunity to latch on without letting up. "Nope, I definitely won't forget." He changed into a cross-legged sitting position, putting his hands on his knees and grinning happily. Touji knocked his good friend's head with an embarrassed face.

In the distance, Kon's ears had perked up at some point,

watching Harutora and Touji restlessly. She seemed to want to return to her master's side but couldn't find the opportunity.

Just then - "Kon." Natsume, sitting on the motorcycle, called out to Kon in a whisper.

Kon walked over in surprise, as Natsume seldom called out to her.

"Don't disturb them."

Natsume warned Kon in a childlike tone. She spoke maturely, but her expression was evidently impatient. Kon replied unwillingly: "I understand."

Natsume sighed lightly, watching Harutora and Touji's backs from afar.

Though she was concerned about her father seeming to have seen through everything, at the same time she understood that she was helpless regarding this kind of situation even if she was concerned. She didn't understand her father's true intent, and simply believed that she should be grateful to her father for sending Yukikaze over.

Right now she was walking the same road as Harutora and Touji. There might be thorns everywhere on this road, but as long as she remembered that everyone was on the same path, they could weather the most difficult storms one by one. Today was the best example.

"But....." Kon muttered, her gaze still looking towards her master and his good friend. The two of them were laughing heartily, teasing each other. "......It's very enviable."

Natsume smiled upon hearing Kon's dissatisfied complaint, saying: "Yeah", expressing agreement from the bottom of her heart.

Even if she was dressed as a male, all that changed was her outer appearance, and she was still an outsider to male friendships.

"Male relationships are really... cunning." Saying this, Natsume shrugged her shoulders, burying her face in the collar of her uniform.

The incident happened at that moment.

A black-colored limousine drove into the crossroads.

The car approached from the direction of Harajuku[66]. Harutora hurriedly stood up, and Touji, Natsume, and Kon watched the limousine in shock.

Because they hadn't ran across a car the whole time, they thought that the nearby roads were already all closed off. Actually, traffic was indeed being controlled, as otherwise, it would be impossible to see no one at all on Aoyama Road no matter how late it was at night.

"W, Were the roadblocks removed?" Harutora murmured, and Natsume and Touji had the same feeling.

Strangely, that limousine was extremely slow, like it was planning on stopping in the center of the crossroads. Moreover, this high-class limousine didn't make a single engine noise, like it was sliding over ice, which was very puzzling.

Harutora and Touji moved back beside the motorcycle Natsume sat on.

Then, the limousine turned soundlessly, stopping right in the place where the Nue had fallen, its side facing Harutora and the others. After the car stopped, Natsume couldn't help but cry out, and at the same time Touji and Harutora were shocked by the abnormality.

The limousine's wheels weren't turning and it was even floating slightly in midair. On that note, there were cracks all over the road due to the Nue, and no matter how high-class the limousine, it couldn't glide over the ground without making a sound.

However, it was actually surrounded on all sides by a powerful enclosing barrier, but of course these Onmyou Academy students couldn't notice that.

Harutora and the others blankly stared at the limousine, and the back car window facing them slowly rolled down.

"Harutora-sama!" Kon's ears and tail stood up, and she called out in a voice full of a tense feeling that she had never shown before.

Then--

"...Good evening."

A greeting came from the car's backseat - from the dark interior of the car. It was a light and lively voice, but that impression was immediately overturned when the car's light lit up.

Logically, it should be the car's interior light that lit the inside of the car. The lights were dim like a candle's flame, and illuminated the wrinkle-filled face of the infirm, elderly man in the car who looked quite old - and who could be mistaken for a mummy.

The old man's wispy white hair was combed back, and he wore a black kimono with a pair of blood-red sunglasses on his face.

That scene was extremely 'strange'. The black limousine, the hazy light, and the old man who emerged in the light. Looking carefully, the distance in the car window felt a bit abnormal. The illuminated old man, the seat, and the space inside the car seemed sunken in darkness, as if a different world existed on the other end of the rolled-down car window.

Just then, the old man behind the 'car window' opened his mouth to chat with Harutora and the others.

"I originally thought that I would retrieve something, but it seems like it was cleanly purified. Ah well, ah well, tonight's game was really very exciting."

The old man spoke happily, but no change was visible on his expression, contrasting with his joyful tone. He just moved his lips mechanically, uttering words.

Harutora froze in place, unmoving, and Natsume, Touji, and Kon were also the same. They couldn't move and were only able to stare straight at the old man, as if an invisible rope had bound them.

"Exciting, it's so exciting, but you're just chicks who just hatched from their eggs, so absolutely don't be complacent." The old man spoke teasingly, his expression unmoving, with only the sound of laughter flowing from his mouth.

"Keep working hard." The old man spoke to Harutora and the others.

"Then, come 'here' as soon as possible. This old man eagerly awaits you....."

Right after his words dropped, the light inside the car darkened and blackness momentarily enveloped the area behind the car window.

The car window slowly rose, closing shut.

Harutora and the others could only one-sidedly listen to the old man's words. "Wh, Who are you?" But Natsume forcefully raised her voice. With those words, the almost tightly shut car window suddenly stopped moving, and the old man's laughing voice once again came through the thin gap in the window.

"My name is Ashiya Doman."

After he said this, the car window closed completely, and Harutora immediately lost consciousness.

He wasn't dizzy, nor did he faint, but with no warning , he suddenly couldn't tell where his body was for some time, losing his sense of time. It was his first time experiencing this shock, and his body went stiff with fright, unable to even scream. When he came to his

senses, the high-class limousine had already vanished before his eyes. He hurriedly looked around, but didn't even see the shadow of the car.

"N, Natsume?"

"Uh, just now my consciousness suddenly.....?"

"Touji? Kon!"

"Damn! What happened just now?"

"I was careless, I deserve a thousand deaths!"

Everyone was panicked, raising his or her guard. When the enemy was right before them, they had been undefended, transfixed, and only hastily upped their guard once the opponent vanished. It was really a comical scene from the perspective of an observer, but they all went on strict alert, not daring to drop their guard.

An abnormal tension. Their limbs shook, sweat dripping like rain.

The nighttime crossroad was tranquil and empty, with no sense of danger. Normalcy appeared before Harutora

and the others, and this 'ordinary' scene slightly alleviated the shock that Harutora and the others had received.

"......He left..... right?" After a while, Harutora asked quietly. Natsume, Touji, Kon, and even Harutora himself also took some time in order to accept that fact.

Not long after, a rigid smile emerged on Touji's face.

"......Hey, Harutora. I feel like I heard a name that couldn't really appear. It feels like I was dreaming....."

"......That's unfortunate, Touji. Honestly, I'm the same, I feel like I heard a name that even someone as ignorant as I am knows, a name that couldn't be heard in reality....."

"Haha..... That's right, it's practically a joke."

"Right, I really want him to stop playing around....."

The demeanors of the two as they chatted weren't leisurely like before. Their faces were pale, and upon listening carefully, it could be heard that their voices were shaking.

"......Ashiya..... He said he was Ashiya Doman?" Natsume spoke, almost falling off the motorcycle. "Is he a fake? How could that.....! Who..... who exactly is he?"

No one present answered that question.

Harutora bit his lip and Touji clicked his tongue, kicking the ground. Kon unconsciously moved towards Harutora. Natsume - blankly looked towards the place where the limousine had once lingered.

That moment was the first glimpse this group of young crows got of how profound the night sky they would spread their wings in was. They already stood on the starting line leading to the deep, dark, and magical world stretching from ancient times until now.

One minute later, Kogure who had been blocked by the barrier hurriedly rushed to Harutora and the others' side, bringing the crow tengu.

Part 5

In the darkness, a man chanted incantations without distractions.

An altar was laid out before the man, a candle flickering on a candlestick. It was the only light source, and the only audible sound was the man chanting incantations. The firelight swayed along with the incantation, casting complex shadows across the man's face.

The man continued chanting incantations.

Other than the candlestick, there were also two charms on the altar. One of them was spread out, but the other was wrapped up in paper, sealed up.

The incantation written on the opened charm was dried up, the text and design visibly cracking. The incantation on the charm wasn't written with ink, but with blood instead.

In front of the charm was a sheet of neatly-folded paper like a scroll recording a rite.

The man continued chanting incantations.

Dawn would be approaching soon, and there was little time left to secretly carry out undercover actions. But the man wasn't concerned at all, and he didn't have the leisure to worry about those distractions.

The man continued chanting incantations.

After a moment, his tightly shut eyes suddenly widened.

"I humbly ask to consult Taizan Fukun, the lord of the underworld--"

The scroll on the altar gave off magical energy, floating in midair, and then flipping open and suddenly igniting in a lightly blue flame. The scroll burned in an instant - and disappeared. The surroundings momentarily sank into a deep darkness where one couldn't see their outstretched hand.

"......Mutobe-san?" The man asked in a whisper in the darkness.

The spread charm gave off a weak light like it was replying to his question. The light immediately vanished, but the man's face had a satisfied smile.

"......You worked hard. Leave the rest to me."

The man murmured, respectfully taking up the charm and wrapping it up with the paper he had prepared in advance, carefully and cautiously sealing it. Then, he put it and the charm he had sealed beforehand into his clothing.

He stood up, dismantling the altar, continuing to chant incantations, and carefully eliminating all traces of the altar. The man's movements weren't visibly hesitant in the expansive darkness.

After the clean-up work had ended, the man took out a phone from his suit pocket, turning on the battery.

As he had expected, there were several missed calls on it. Though the aftermath would be troublesome, they were just chores anyway, and it wouldn't be hard to properly deal with things without arousing suspicion.

Now, he had to inherit the will of his comrade and become the messiah. For this, he had to deal with things cautiously and accurately no matter what kind of situation he encountered. The man had the self-confidence that he could do it.

He opened the folding phone, checking the phone's screen. The liquid crystal screen gave off a slight light, illuminating the man's face in the darkness.

His black hair blended with the darkness, mixed with a strand of bright vermilion[67].

Like blood dripping in the darkness.

Tokyo Ravens:Volume3 Afterword

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ A Japanese plant sacred in the Shinto religion. [1]
2. ↑ 'Tasukete' means 'help' in Japanese. The original Japanese version contains 'help' in English.
3. ↑ 'Onegai' means 'please' in Japanese.
4. ↑ Again, this is the English 'Please' in the Japanese version.
5. ↑ Heian-era Japanese clothing.
6. ↑ Exam determining whether a student is qualified to advance to the next year/grade.
7. ↑ A district of Toyko.
8. ↑ Divine Spirits and Heroic Spirits [2]
9. ↑ A historic Japanese government agency dealing with matters concerning the royal family. Household Agency
10. ↑ Referring to the first attack on Natsume. Not Dairenji Suzuka's business.
11. ↑ A non-government Onmyouji in Heian period, generally refers to Ashiya Doman.
12. ↑ The moment at dusk when the sky grows dark. Supposedly a time when it is easier to meet ghosts and demons.
13. ↑ A time from two to two-thirty when ghosts and goblins are active.
14. ↑ Bean throwing.

15. ↑ A district of Tokyo.
16. ↑ A special ward of Tokyo.
17. ↑ Also a special ward of Tokyo.
18. ↑ You know what this is. But if you don't, [3]
19. ↑ A river stretching around within Tokyo.
20. ↑ A bridge in Chiyoda, Tokyo. Happens to cross the Kanda River
21. ↑ One of the major trunk railway lines in Japan[4]
22. ↑ Military time for 5:15
23. ↑ A mythical creature made up of a combination of different animals' body parts.
24. ↑ Essentially a Japanese chimera.
25. ↑ Onmyoudou historically dealt a lot with how things should be arranged and what were spiritually good ways to orient things.
26. ↑ Kimon
27. ↑ The twelve directions linked to zodiac signs [5]
28. ↑ Urakimon
29. ↑ Shinjuku is a special ward of Tokyo. JR stands for Japan Railways.
30. ↑ A practice of hand gestures found in Shugendo and Esoteric Buddhism using 'Nine Syllables'. [6]
31. ↑ Simplified version and 1 of the 2 current practices.
32. ↑ This is part of the kuji-kiri practice.
33. ↑ The grid pattern, haya-kuji was said to be created by Ashiya Doman

34. ↑ Hell to translate. I copied the chant portion from the manga version of Tokyo Ravens, and I have no idea what it means.
35. ↑ The 'Wheel of Dharma' in Buddhism.[7]
36. ↑ Ohtomo uses this to subdue the Mystical Investigator in Volume 2 Chapter 5, but he uses it without any seals or chants.
37. ↑ He was going to say 'idiot'.
38. ↑ Kotodama [8]
39. ↑ Bija [9]
40. ↑ One of the Buddhist Wisdom Kings.
41. ↑ Sanskrit? I think. Your guess is as good as mine regarding its meaning.
42. ↑ A bodhisattva of Mahayana buddhism, the protector and guide of the Buddha.
43. ↑ A ritual speech similar to a mantra.
44. ↑ A guardian deity of Vajrana Buddhism, one of the Wisdom Kings.
45. ↑ A Japanese legendary creature that more or less resembles a human. [10]
46. ↑ A noise kind of like a crow's caw, I think.
47. ↑ Instantaneous movement.
48. ↑ It's not fully explained what this is, though I believe this is a series-specific term. Treat it as some sort of damage to the spirit.

49. ↑ Like a fallen angel falls. Not like tripping and falling.
50. ↑ Also known as the Sengoku period. This was approximately from the middle of the 15th century to the beginning of the 17th century. Eventually led to the unification of Japan under the Tokugawa shogunate.
51. ↑ A Shinto shrine located in Shibuya dedicated to the deified spirits of Emperor Meiji and his wife.
52. ↑ A Shibuya neighborhood.
53. ↑ A multi-use stadium.
54. ↑ A district of Tokyo.
55. ↑ Referring to Hokuto.
56. ↑ Night Parade of One Hundred Demons.
57. ↑ Sanskrit. Meaning unknown.
58. ↑ Esoteric Buddhism.
59. ↑ A double-edged pestle. The left-hand item in [11].
60. ↑ A large stadium in Aoyama.
61. ↑ This is in English in the original text, for some reason.
62. ↑ Some strange chant. Needs a translation.
63. ↑ In Shintoism, the first god to come into being.
64. ↑ There's an idiom used here that I don't know an English equivalent for. Translated literally, it is: ' That's not just a demon with a club, it's already a demon wielding a blade'.

65. ↑ In Japanese legend, onis wear tiger loincloths.
66. ↑ A ward of Shibuya.
67. ↑ A shade of red.